

GEORGES SIMENON

Lock N° 1

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



Georges Simenon

LOCK NO. 1

Translated by David Coward



PENGUIN BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014

penguin.com

First published in French as *L'ecluse no. 1* in *Paris-Soir*, in instalments from 23 May to 16 June 1933

First published in book form by Fayard 1933

This translation first published in Penguin Books 2015

Copyright © 1933 by Georges Simenon Limited

Translation copyright © 2015 by David Coward

GEORGES SIMENON ® Simenon.tm

MAIGRET ® Georges Simenon Limited

All rights reserved.

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

The moral rights of the author and translator have been asserted.

ISBN 978-0-698-19466-3

Cover photograph (detail) © Harry Gruyaert/Magnum Photos

Cover design by Alceu Chiesorin Nunes

Version_1

Contents

Title Page

Copyright

About the Author

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

EXTRA: Chapter 1 from *Maigret*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points ... 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

LOCK NO. 1

‘I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov’

– William Faulkner

‘A truly wonderful writer ... marvellously readable – lucid, simple, absolutely in tune with the world he creates’

– Muriel Spark

‘Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the bleakness of human life’

– A. N. Wilson

‘One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century ... Simenon was unequalled at making us look inside, though the ability was masked by his brilliance at absorbing us obsessively in his stories’

– *Guardian*

‘A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part of it’

– Peter Ackroyd

‘The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in literature’

– André Gide

‘Superb ... The most addictive of writers ... A unique teller of tales’

– *Observer*

‘The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all their disconcerting complexity’

– Anita Brookner

‘A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined a high literary reputation with popular appeal’

– P. D. James

‘A supreme writer ... Unforgettable vividness’

– *Independent*

‘Compelling, remorseless, brilliant’

– John Gray

‘Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century’

– John Banville



1.

When you watch fish through a layer of water which prevents all contact between them and you, you see that they remain absolutely still for a long time, for no reason, and then, with a twitch of their fins, they dart away so that they can do nothing again somewhere else, except more waiting.

It was in the same state of stillness, and as if for no reason too, that the last number 13 Bastille-Créteil tram, lit up by its yellow lights, rumbled along the side of Carrières Wharf.

It looked as if it was going to stop at a side-road, just by a streetlight, but the conductor yanked the bell pull, and the vehicle clanked off towards Charenton.

In its wake, the wharf was left empty and stagnant, like a drowned landscape. To the right, barges rocked on the canal under the moon. A trickle of water escaped through a badly closed sluice. It was the only sound under a sky which was more tranquil and deeper than a lake.

Two bars were still lit up. They faced each other, each one on a street corner.

In one, five men were playing cards, slowly, not speaking. Three were wearing sailors' or river pilots' caps, and the landlord, who was sitting with them, was in shirt-sleeves.

In the other bar, no one was playing cards. There were just three men inside. They were sitting around a table, staring dreamily at small glasses of cheap brandy. The light was grey and smelled of sleep. From time to time, the black-moustached landlord, who was wearing a blue pullover, yawned before reaching for his glass with one hand.

Sitting opposite him was a short man overrun by thick, flaxen hair, like dry hay. He was either brooding or befuddled, or perhaps drunk? His rheumy eyes looked as though they were swimming through troubled waters and at intervals he would nod his head as if agreeing with his inner monologue while the man next to him, also a canal man, set his gaze free to wander outside, in the dark.

Time fled soundlessly. There was not even the tick of a clock. Next to the bar was a row of small, poky houses each with a garden round it, but all their lights were out. Then at number 8, came a detached house on six floors, already old and smoke-blackened, too narrow for its height. On the first floor, a few gleams filtered through venetian blinds. On the second, where there were no shutters, a crude blind made a rectangle of light.

Finally, directly opposite, on the canal bank, a heap of stones, sand, a crane, a number of empty carts.

Yet music pulsed through the air. It was coming from somewhere. It had to be found. Its source was further along than number 8, set back from the road, a wooden shed with a sign saying: *Dance Hall*.

No one was dancing. In fact the only person there was the fat woman who owned it. She was reading a newspaper and got up at intervals to feed a five-sou coin into the mechanical piano.

Sooner or later, somebody or something was bound to make a stir. It turned out to be the very hairy bargee from the bar on the right-hand side. He got to his feet unsteadily, stared at his empty glasses and did the calculation in his head while he searched through his pockets. When he had counted out the right money, he laid it on the smooth top of the wooden table, touched the peak of his cap and set a wavering course for the door.

The other two men looked at each other. The landlord winked. The fingers of the old man dithered uncertainly in thin air before settling on the door handle, and he swayed as he turned to shut the door behind him.

His footsteps were as audible as if the pavement had been hollow. The sound was irregular. He took three or four paces then stopped: he was either hesitating or concentrating on staying upright.

When he reached the canal, he collided with the metal railing which clanged, started down the stone steps and found himself on the unloading wharf.

The outlines of boats were clearly picked out by the moon. Their names were as easy to read as in broad daylight. The nearest barge, which was separated from the quayside by a plank which served as a gangway, was called the *Golden Fleece*. There were other boats behind it, both to the left and right, and they were at least five rows deep, some with holds open near a crane, waiting to be unloaded, others with their prows nudging the gates of the lock through which they would pass at first light, and lastly those hulks which are always to be seen, God knows why, loitering in and around canal ports, apparently having outlived their usefulness.

The old man, all alone in this motionless universe, hiccupped and stepped on to the plank, which bent under him. When he got to the middle, it occurred to him to turn round, perhaps for a sight of the windows of the bar. He managed the first part of the action, swayed, straightened his back and found himself in the water, hanging on to the plank with one hand.

He had not cried out. He hadn't even gasped. There had been only a faint splash, which was already fading, for the man was barely moving. His forehead was furrowed as if something was forcing him to think. He braced his arms to haul himself up on to the plank. He failed, tried again, eyes staring, breathing heavily.

On the quayside, pressed close against the stone wall, two lovers listened, motionless, holding their breath. A car horn sounded in Charenton.

All of a sudden there was a howl, an extraordinary wail, which tore through the all-enveloping calm.

It was the old man in the water who was straining his throat in panic. He was no longer making any attempt to think. He was struggling like a madman, kicking out with his legs, making the water boil.

Then other sounds were heard round about. There was a stir on board a barge. Elsewhere the voice of a still half-sleeping woman spoke:

'Aren't you going to see what that is?'

Doors opened higher up, on the quayside, the doors of both bars. The couple under the wall moved apart, and the man said under his breath:

'Quick! Go home!'

He took a few steps, hesitated and then called out:

'Where?'

He heard the cry. It came again. Other voices came nearer, and people leaned over the railing.

‘What’s happened?’

The young man broke into a run and answered:

‘I don’t know yet. It’s that way ... In the water ...’

His girlfriend remained where she was, her hands clasped together, not daring to advance or retreat.

‘I can see him! ... Come quick!’

As the shouts grew feebler, they turned into desperate gurgles. The young man could make out hands clinging to the plank and a head sticking out of the water, but he had no idea what to do. He waited, with his face turned towards the steps that led down to the wharf, and kept repeating:

‘Come quick!’

A voice said tonelessly:

‘It’s Gassin.’

Seven men now arrived, the five drinkers from one bar and two from the other.

‘Come nearer ... You take one arm and I’ll get the other.’

‘Go careful on the plank.’

It sagged beneath their weight. From a hatch on the barge a female figure all in white, with fair hair, started to emerge.

‘Have you got him?’

The old man was no longer shouting. He hadn’t passed out. He was staring straight in front of him, uncomprehendingly, making no attempt to help his rescuers.

They hauled him up out of the water by stages. He was so limp that he had to be dragged on to the wharf.

The figure in white walked across the gangplank. She was young, wearing a long nightdress, with nothing on her feet, and the moonlight which lit her from behind picked out the lines of her naked body under the cotton. Only she still stared down at the water, which was becoming calm again, and then it was her turn to scream as she pointed at something as hazy and pallid as a jellyfish.

Two of the men who were tending the boatman turned to look, and when they too saw the milky patch on the black water they felt the same chill run up and

down their spine.

‘Over there! ... There’s a ...’

They all looked, forgetting the boatman, who lay flat out on the stones of the wharf, which was criss-crossed by water runaways.

‘Bring us a boat-hook!’

It was the girl who fetched one from the deck of the barge and handed it to them.

It was no longer the same. Neither the atmosphere. Nor even the temperature of the night air! It felt suddenly colder, with pulses of warm air.

‘Have you got him?’

The iron tip of the boat-hook moved through the water, prodding the shapeless mass in an attempt to hook it. One man lying flat on his stomach on the plank was stretching with one hand, trying to get hold of the clothes on the body.

And in the night, on the barges, there was a stir. People were there, standing, waiting and not speaking.

‘Got him!’

‘Pull him in ... gently now.’

On the wharf water was draining out of the old boatman as out of a sponge, while the body of a drowned man, bigger, heavier, more deeply inert, was being hauled up. From a tug some way off came a voice which asked simply:

‘Dead?’

The girl in the nightdress watched while the men lay the body down on the wharf, a metre from the first one. She did not seem to understand: her lips trembled as though she were about to burst into tears.

‘Good God! It’s Mimile!’

‘Ducrau!’

Men who were upright stood over men who were prone but none knew which way to look. They were shaken, shocked. They wanted to do something and they all looked scared.

‘We should ... straight away ...’

‘Yes ... I’ll go ...’

One of them ran off towards the lock. They heard him knock with both hands on the lock-keeper’s door and shout:

‘Quick! Get your first-aid box! It’s Émile Ducrau!’

Émile Ducrau ... Émile Ducrau ... Mimile? The words were spoken, repeated from barge to barge. People clambered over rudders and gangplanks while the landlord of the bar kept raising and lowering the arm of the drowned corpse.

The old man was forgotten. No one even noticed that he had sat up, obscured by the legs which hemmed him in, and was looking around him in a daze.

The lock-keeper arrived at a run. A man scurried down the stone steps just ahead of a policeman.

A window opened on the second floor of the tall house and a woman leaned out, coloured pink by a rose-coloured silk lampshade.

‘Is he dead?’ people whispered.

No one knew. They could not know. The lock-keeper set up his respirator. They could hear the regular pulsing of the pump.

In the midst of the confusion, the half-formed words, the muttered orders, the sound of soles crunching on gravel, the boatman half propped himself up on his hands, slumped and collided with a man standing next to him, who helped him to his feet.

It was all insubstantial and blurred, muffled, distorted, as if it was all happening under water.

The old man, who was just managing to stay upright, stared down at the other body as if he were dreaming it all. He panted, still drunk, his breath reeking more strongly of alcohol than ever.

‘He tried to grab me down there!’

Seeing him standing up and, even more, hearing him speak was as strange as if he had been a ghost. He gazed at the body, the artificial respirator and the water, especially the water just under the gangplank.

‘The swine wouldn’t let go of me!’

They listened but didn’t believe him. The girl in white tried to put a scarf around his neck, but he pushed her away and stayed rooted to the same spot, ruminating, suspicious, as if he had come up against a superhuman problem.

‘It came up from the bottom,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Something grabbed my legs. I gave it a good kicking, but the more I kicked the more it wrapped itself around me.’

One of the boatmen’s wives brought a bottle of brandy, poured a glass and held it out to the old man, who spilled more than half of it, for he couldn’t take

his eyes off the body and went rambling on.

‘What exactly happened here?’ asked the policeman.

But the old man just shrugged his shoulders and continued his one-track monologue, more quietly, in the thickets of his beard.

Apart from those who were working the pump, people hung around in groups on the wharf. They were waiting for the doctor.

‘Go back to bed,’ someone said to his wife.

‘Will you come and tell me if ...?’

No one had noticed the old man purloin the brandy, which had been left on a block of dressed stone. He was now sitting by himself with his back against the wall of the quay, drinking from the bottle and thinking such bitter thoughts that his face was screwed up tight.

From where he sat, he could see the drowned man. It was at him that his grumbling was directed. For he was blaming him for something. He swore at him. He accused him of dark deeds and from time to time even challenged him to come back and square up.

The girl in the nightdress tried to take the bottle away from him, but all he said was:

‘Go to bed, you!’

He pushed her away, for she was preventing him from seeing the man who had been rescued. They were about the same height, but the other man was broader, bulkier, with an enormously thick neck and a square-shaped head covered with a mass of hair.

There was the sound of a car engine. People turned to look at the shadowy figures which emerged from it up on the quay and then came down the stone steps. There were policemen and a doctor. Even before they knew what had happened, the police were telling the onlookers to move back. The doctor put his bag down on a concrete block.

An inspector in plain clothes who had been talking to bystanders turned his attention to the old man, who had been pointed out to him. But it was too late to question him. He had emptied half the brandy bottle and was glaring suspiciously at everyone.

‘Is he your father?’ the inspector asked the girl in the nightdress.

She didn't seem to understand. Too many things were going on at the same time. The landlord of the bar stepped in and said:

'Gassin was already pretty drunk. He must have slipped off the gangplank.'

'And the other man?'

The doctor was undressing the other man.

'Émile Ducrau, the one who owns tugs and quarries. He lives over there.'

He motioned to the tall house. The venetian blinds on the first floor were still leaking thin streams of light and the windows on the second still showed pink.

'On the second floor?'

Bystanders explained hesitantly:

'First,' said one.

Another added mysteriously:

'On the second too. I mean, he's got somebody on the second floor.'

'You mean he's been playing house with somebody else?'

High above them the window of the pink room shut, and the blind came down.

'Anyone told the family?'

'No. We were waiting to know what was happening.'

'Go and put some stockings on,' one boatman said to his wife. 'And fetch me my cap.'

And so, from time to time figures were observed moving from one boat to the next. Through hatches and portholes oil-lamps could be seen, and even framed photographs were visible hanging on pine walls.

The doctor said in the inspector's ear:

'You'd better call the chief. This man was knifed before being thrown into the water.'

'Is he dead?'

It was as if the drowned man had been waiting for just that question to open his eyes and, with a gasp, cough up water. He was seeing everything at an angle because he was lying on his back, so that his horizon was the star-studded sky. From where he was, the people round him rose giant-like into the heavens, legs resembling interminable columns. He said nothing. Perhaps he was not yet thinking anything. He looked with eyes that were slow and flinty, but gradually they relaxed and became less fixed.

His gasp must have been audible, for everyone started forward at the same instant, and suddenly the policemen imposed the usual, official order on proceedings, that is that they formed into a line, held back the crowd and let through only those who needed to be there.

The man on the ground saw the space around him empty and then a lot of police uniforms and silver-braided police headgear. He continued dribbling greyish water, which ran over his chin down on to his chest, while his arms were being continuously pumped. They were his arms. He watched their movements out of curiosity and frowned when someone at the back of the crowd said:

‘Is he dead?’

Old Gassin got to his feet, without relaxing his hold on the bottle. He took three faltering steps, parked himself between the rescued man’s legs and spoke to him. His speech so thick and his tongue so clotted that no one understood a single word.

But Ducrau saw him. He did not take his eyes off him. He was thinking. He seemed to be racking his memory ...

‘Move further back!’ the doctor said crossly and he pushed Gassin so roughly that the drunk went sprawling on the ground, broke his bottle and stayed where he was, moaning and fuming, as he tried to fend off his daughter, who was bending over him.

Another car stopped on the quay above and a new group formed around the police chief.

‘Is he fit to be questioned?’

‘No harm trying.’

‘You think he’ll pull round?’

It was the man, Émile Ducrau, himself who replied, with a smile. It was a peculiar smile, still not fully formed, more a grimace, but everyone had a clear sense that it was an answer to the question.

Somewhat uncertainly the police chief acknowledged him by removing his hat.

‘I’m glad to see that you’re feeling better.’

It was awkward speaking down from a height to a man whose face was turned up to the sky above while the rescue team were still working on him.

‘Were you attacked? Was it far from here? Do you know where exactly you were stabbed and then thrown into the water?’

Water was still coming out of his mouth, in weak spurts. Émile Ducrau was in no hurry to reply or even to try to speak. He turned his head a little because just then the girl in white passed through his field of vision, and his eyes followed her until she reached the gangway.

She had gone, with the help of a neighbour, to make coffee for her father, who resisted whenever anyone suggested he should go home to bed.

‘Do you remember what happened?’

And since he was still not responding, the police chief took the doctor to one side and asked:

‘Do you think he understands?’

‘I’d say so.’

‘But ...’

They had their backs to the prone man when they were stupefied to hear him say:

‘... you’re hurting me!’

All eyes turned to him. He was showing signs of impatience. It seemed that trying to speak was a great effort to him. Moving one arm painfully, he added:

‘Wanna go home.’

What his hand was trying to do was to point at the house on six floors, a little way off behind him. The police chief looked rather put out and hesitated.

‘Sorry to insist, but it’s my job. Did you see your attackers? Did you recognize them? Maybe they haven’t gone very far.’

Their eyes met. Émile Ducrau’s gaze was steady. Yet he did not answer.

‘There’s going to have to be an investigation, and the prosecutor’s office is bound to ask me if ...’

What happened next was unexpected. The shapeless bulk, which had looked so limp as it lay on the light-coloured stones of the unloading wharf, roused itself briefly and pushed away everything that cramped its movements.

‘... go home!’ Ducrau said again in a fury.

There was a feeling that if they went on opposing his wishes he might turn very nasty and even summon up enough strength to stand up and set about those crowding round him.

‘Go easy!’ exclaimed the doctor. ‘You’ll make the wound bleed.’

But the man with the bull’s neck didn’t care, he had suddenly had enough of lying flat on his back in the middle of a lot of gawping people.

‘Take him home,’ sighed the police chief with a gesture of resignation.

The stretcher from Lock No. 1 had been brought. Ducrau didn’t want to be carried on a stretcher. He growled a refusal. They had to carry him by his arms, legs and shoulders. While he was being helped away, he looked angrily at the bystanders, and the bystanders made way because they were afraid of him.

The procession crossed the street. The police chief called a halt.

‘Hold it there. I must go up and warn his wife.’

He rang the bell while the men who were carrying him waited under the green gaslight which marked the stop for trams and buses.

Meanwhile, a number of boatmen were having a very hard time carrying old Gassin across the gangplank of the *Golden Fleece*. He was dead drunk. He had also cut his hand on a shard of glass from the bottle.



2.

When, two days later, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret stepped off the number 13 tram opposite the two bars, it was ten in the morning and, standing on the kerb with the sun shining directly into his eyes and his ears filled with noise, there he remained for some time, scowling, while lorries white with cement dust thundered past between him and the canal.

He had not been present when the public prosecutor's people visited the crime scene, and his knowledge of the area, as of the case itself, was theoretical. On the small map which had been drawn for him, it looked simple: canal to the right, with the lock and Gassin's boat moored on the unloading wharf; to the left, the two bars, the tall house and, at the far end, the dance hall.

Perhaps that was how it really was: flat, a scene with no perspective, no depth, no life. But not quite: the barges, for example. There were fifty in the reach above the lock, some lying next to the quay, others tucked snugly against them and still more manoeuvring slowly in the sunshine. And then there was the road, full of endless movement, led by heavy lorries, which created noise wherever they went.

The soul of the townscape, however, was elsewhere, or at least its heart was, for its beating made the air itself pulsate. This heart was a tall misshapen structure which stood by the water's edge, a tower of metal girders which by night would be no more than a patch of grey but by day spat out noise through its steel plates, iron girders and pulleys as it crushed stone which clattered down on to screens and then was conveyed away, through the din, to be deposited on smoking heaps of dust.

On the top of the tower could be made out a blue enamel plate: *Émile Ducrau Enterprises*.

Washing was drying on clothes lines slung above the barges. A fair-haired young woman was throwing a bucket of water over the deck of the *Golden Fleece*.

Another number 13 tram clanked by, then another, and Maigret, who was basking in the warmth, his skin damp and sensual as it never is except in the rays of the first April sunshine, set off dutifully towards the tall house. He could not see anyone behind the glass windows of the concierge's lodge. There was a stair carpet, dark-red and worn. The stairs were varnished and the walls painted to look like marble. The landing, with its three dark doors and the bright gleam of one highly polished brass door knob, smelled of dust, mediocrity and respectability. A shaft of sunlight slanted across an inner court and, sidling through a gable window, gilded the stairwell.

Maigret rang twice or three times. After the second ring he heard sounds from inside, but five minutes went by before the door opened.

'Does Monsieur Ducrau live here?'

'He does. Come in.'

The maid was red-cheeked, too flustered and Maigret smiled as he looked at her, though he could not have said why exactly. She was plump and inviting, especially when seen from behind, for her features, which were coarse and of a hard, irregular cast, were a disappointment.

'Who shall I say is calling?'

'Police Judiciaire.'

She headed for a door but had to stoop to pull up one stocking. She took another couple of steps and then, judging that she was hidden by the door, she refastened her suspender and pulled her girdle down while Maigret's smile grew broader. Whispering came from the next room. The girl returned.

'Please come this way.'

The smile on Maigret's face was not entirely down to the sun. It rose to his lips from deep down, and he stood there beaming. Already in the hallway, virtually as soon as he set foot on the doormat, he had sensed what was going on and by the time he spoke he was absolutely sure:

'Monsieur Ducrau?'

His eyes were laughing; his lips instinctively formed into an amused curl, and from that moment the truth was tacitly admitted by the two men. Ducrau looked at the maid, at his visitor and then at his red plush armchair. Then he tidied his thick mop of hair, which did not need tidying, and smiled back, a smile of gratification which was slightly awkward but pleased all the same.

Sunshine streamed through three windows. One of them was wide open and let in so much noise from the street and the racketing crushing mill that when Maigret tried to speak he could hardly hear the sound of his own voice.

Émile Ducrau had resumed his seat in his armchair with a sigh of relief. It was obvious that despite appearance he was not yet back to full strength. A dew of perspiration remained on his forehead after his gambol with the maid, and his breathing was rapid. Even so, the evening before, the prosecutor's investigators had been amazed to see sitting up in an armchair a man they had fully expected to find prostrate in his bed.

He was wearing slippers and a nightshirt with red embroidery on the collar under his old jacket, and the same shabby anything-goes attitude was visible in every detail of his living room, with its unremarkable furniture which was thirty or forty years old, in the black and gold frames containing photographs of tugs, and the roll-top desk which stood in one corner.

‘Are you the one who’s in charge of the investigation?’

His smile steadily faded. Ducrau grew serious again, his gaze inquisitive and a hint of aggression already in his voice.

‘I suppose you’ve already got your own theory about what happened? No? That’s good, though I’m surprised to hear that coming from a policeman!’

He had not set out to be disagreeable. It was just the way he was. From time to time, he scowled, probably because the wound in his back was giving him pain.

‘You must have something to drink. Mathilde! ... Mathilde! ... For God’s sake, Mathilde!’

In the end the girl came, her hands covered with soap suds.

‘Pour two glasses of white wine! The good stuff!’

He filled the chair with his bulk. That and the fact that his feet were resting on an embroidered cushion made his legs look shorter.

‘Well, then, what have they been telling you?’

He had the habit, when speaking, of darting little glances out of the window, towards the lock. Suddenly he growled:

‘Ach! They’ve let themselves be overtaken by one of Poliet & Chausson’s cement boats!’

Maigret saw a loaded barge, its hull painted yellow, slowly nosing its way into the chamber of the lock. Behind it, another barge, marked with a blue triangle, was hove to on the canal and some people, three or four of them, were waving their arms and clearly shouting insults at each other.

‘All boats showing a blue triangle belong to me,’ Ducrau explained, pointing the maid, who had just come in, to a chair, saying:

‘Put the bottle and the glasses down there. We don’t stand on ceremony, here, inspector ... Now what was I saying? Ah yes! I’m curious to know what people are making of this business.’

Beneath his bluff good humour lay an undercurrent of malevolence, and the longer he looked at Maigret the more apparent this malevolence became, perhaps because physically the inspector was as burly and powerful as he was, only on a bigger scale, and because in the apartment his calmness suggested a large, immovable object.

‘I was given the case file this morning,’ he said.

‘Have you read it?’

The front door opened, someone walked through the hall and came into the room. It was a woman of about fifty, thin, sad-looking, who was carrying a net shopping bag. She spoke apologetically:

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know ...’

Maigret was already on his feet.

‘Madame Ducrau, I assume? Very pleased to meet you.’

She gave an awkward nod and left the room backwards. She could be heard talking to the maid, and that same smile of Maigret’s came back, for he could now imagine the details of the morning’s goings-on more clearly than earlier.

‘My wife has never managed to get out of the habit of doing housework,’ muttered Ducrau. ‘She could pay ten servants if she wanted to but she still does all the shopping herself!’

‘You began as master of a tug, I believe?’

‘I started the way everybody starts, at the bottom! The tub was called the *Eagle*. I acquired her by marrying the owner’s daughter, who you’ve just met. As of now, the fleet of *Eagles* has reached number twenty-four. In this port alone, there are two who are going up as far as Dizy today, and I’ve been told there are five coming downstream. All the river pilots in both the bars down below work for me. I’ve already bought up eighteen barges, some store-boats, two dredgers ...’

His eyes grew narrower and narrower until all they were seeing were Maigret’s eyes.

‘Is that what you wanted to know?’

Then, turning towards the door:

‘Keep quiet out there!’ he yelled to the two invisible women, whose voices could be heard no louder than a murmur.

‘Your very good health! They must have told you that I’m offering the police a reward of twenty thousand francs if they catch the man who attacked me, which is why, I imagine, they’ve sent me a top man. What are you looking at?’

‘Nothing special. The canal, the lock, the boats ...’

Through the windows the bright, glowing landscape was positively bustling with life. Seen from above, the barges seemed more ponderous, as though they were bogged down in water that was too dense. Standing in his wherry, a boatman was putting a coat of grey bitumen paint on the hull of his boat which rose two metres out of the water. And there were dogs, chickens in a wire-netting coop, and the girl with fair hair was on deck, polishing the brasses. People came and went past the sluices, and the boats which had gone down through the lock appeared to hesitate before letting themselves be taken by the current of the Seine.

‘So in a word, all that is in a manner of speaking yours?’

‘No, not all. But all the people you see down there depend in some way or other on me, especially since I bought the chalk quarries, out in the sticks, in Champagne.’

All the furniture in the apartment looked like the furniture which is piled high in auction rooms to be sold off on Saturdays, when the hard-up come in search of a second-hand table or washstand. A smell of onions frying wafted in from the kitchen. It was accompanied by the sizzling sound of butter on the stove.

‘One question, if I may. The report states that you don’t remember anything that happened before the moment they pulled you from the water.’

Ducrau, wary-eyed, was clipping the end of a cigar.

‘At what time exactly did you stop remembering? Could you, for example, tell me what you did on the evening before last?’

‘My daughter and her husband came here to dinner. Her husband is an infantry captain based at Versailles. They come every Wednesday.’

‘You also have a son?’

‘Yes. He’s at the École de Chartes in Paris, but we don’t see a lot of him at home. I’ve given him his own room on the fifth floor.’

‘So you didn’t see him that evening?’

Ducrau did not reply at once. He did not take his eyes off Maigret and, as he puffed slowly on his cigar, he weighed each question he was asked and every word he spoke.

‘Listen, inspector. I’m going to say something important and I advise you not to forget it if you want us to get along together. No one ever gets the better of Mimile! That’s me, Mimile. It’s what they called me when I had my first tug, and to this day there are lock-keepers in the Haute-Marne who don’t know me as anything else. Do you understand me? I’m no more of a fool than you are. In this business, I’m the one who has paid! I’m the one who was knifed! I’m the one who brought you here!’

Maigret did not bat an eyelid, but for the first time in ages he was revelling in the company of someone who was really worth knowing.

‘Drink up. Have a cigar. Put a few in your pocket for later. Go ahead! Do your job but no fancy tricks. When the people from the prosecutor’s office came to see me yesterday, there was an examining magistrate, a real martinet, who walked around in cream-coloured gloves as if he was afraid to get his hands dirty. So what did I do? I told him to take his hat off and put his cigarette out, while I blew smoke in his face. Are you with me? Now I’m listening.’

‘My turn to ask a question. Do you still intend to pursue your case? Yes? And do you really want me to find the guilty man?’

The shadow of a smile flickered on Ducrau’s lips. Instead of answering, he murmured:

‘Next question.’

‘That’s it. It’s not too late.’

‘Do you have anything else to say to me?’

‘No.’

Maigret got up and, his pupils made smaller by the sun, stood stock still by the open window.

‘Mathilde! Mathilde!’ shouted the man in the chair. ‘First, you must try to come when I call. Second, put on a clean apron. Now, off you go and fetch a bottle of champagne. One of the eight bottles at the back on the left-hand side.’

‘I don’t drink champagne,’ said Maigret when the maid had gone.

‘You’ll drink this one. It’s an 1897 Brut, sent to me by the manager of the biggest vintners in Rheims.’

He was mellower now. There even stirred in him a flicker of excitement, though it was barely perceptible.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘Gassin’s boat.’

‘Gassin is an old friend, you know, the only one who still treats me like in the old days!

‘The first time we went to sea, we went together. I gave him command of one of my boats which does the Belgian run mainly.’

‘He’s got a pretty daughter ...’

It was merely an impression, for the distance was too great for Maigret to see more than a silhouette. And yet it was enough to make it certain that the girl was good-looking.

Yet she was just a hazy figure! A black dress and a white apron, and feet bare in her clogs.

Ducrau did not respond and after a few moments of silence he barked as if he had reached the end of his patience:

‘Go on! The woman upstairs, the serving girl and the rest of them! I know where you’re headed ...’

The kitchen door opened. Before fully emerging, Madame Ducrau coughed discreetly and said hesitantly:

‘Shall I go for some ice?’

He became incandescent:

‘Why don’t you traipse all the way to Rheims for the champagne?’

She vanished without a word. The door stayed partly open while Ducrau resumed:

‘This is the way of it. On the second floor, directly above this room, I’ve installed a young woman, name of Rose, who used to be a hostess at the Maxim.’

He made no effort to keep his voice down, the very opposite. His wife must have heard. There was a rattle of glasses from the kitchen. The maid, in a clean apron, entered carrying a tray.

‘If you want to know more, I give her two thousand francs a month plus dresses, but she makes nearly all of them herself. That’ll do, girl! Just put it down and get out! Would you like to open the bottle, inspector?’

Maigret was getting used to being there. He was hardly aware of the noise either of the crusher or of the street, which mingled with the buzzing of two large bluebottles in the room.

‘We were talking about the day before yesterday. My daughter and her idiot of a husband were here, as usual. I went out after we’d had dessert. I can’t stand pests, and my son-in-law is a pest. Here’s to you!’

He smacked his lips and sighed:

‘That’s all. It was around ten o’clock. I walked along the pavement. I had a drink with Catherine, who runs the dance hall a little way along the street. Then I went on and reached the corner of the narrow alley, further along, where there’s a streetlamp. I much prefer drinking a beer or two with tarts than being with my son-in-law.’

‘When you left that establishment, did you notice if anyone was following you?’

‘I never saw anything at all.’

‘Which way did you go next?’

‘No idea.’

It was curt. His voice had turned aggressive again. Ducrau, taking too large a gulp of champagne, spluttered, coughed, then spat on the faded carpet.

The medical report said that the wound in the barge-owner’s back was superficial and that he had been in the water for three or four minutes and had perhaps surfaced once or twice.

‘Of course, you don’t suspect anybody?’

‘I suspect everybody!’

He had a strange face. His head was large, fleshy and slack-featured and yet he gave out an impression of hardness and exceptional strength. When he was watching out for a reaction from Maigret, he had the look of old peasants who clinch deals at farmers’ fairs, but a split-second later the expression in his blue eyes was disarmingly naive.

One minute he was threatening, yelling, cursing and the next it was far from clear if he wasn’t behaving that way because it amused him.

‘That was what I wanted to make a point of telling you. Because I’m entitled to suspect everybody: my wife, my son, my daughter, her husband, Rose, the maid, Gassin ...’

‘... and his daughter ...’

‘Yes, Aline too if you like.’

But there was a subtle difference in his voice.

‘And there’s something else I will add. You have my permission to make life unpleasant for all these people connected to me. I know the police. I know they’ll go sniffing around, even in their dustbins. We might as well make a start now. Jeanne! ... Jeanne! ...’

His wife appeared looking surprised and very apprehensive.

‘Come in, for God’s sake! It’s no good meeting company behaving like a servant. Get yourself a glass. Go on! And clink with the inspector. Now, can you guess what he wants to know?’

Pale and impassive, she was badly dressed, her hair was badly combed, and she had aged as badly as the furniture in the living room. The sun hurt her eyes, and after twenty-five years of marriage she still jumped each time her husband raised his voice.

‘He wants to know what we talked about all through dinner when Berthe came with her husband.’

She tried to smile. The hand holding her glass of champagne shook. Maigret noticed her fingers, which were wrinkled from working in the kitchen.

‘Answer. Have a drink first.’

‘We talked about all sorts.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘I’m sorry, inspector, but I don’t understand what my husband means.’

‘Of course you do! Listen, I’ll help you ...’

She was standing up, next to the red armchair in which Ducrau was so firmly ensconced that he and it looked as if they were one and the same.

‘Berthe started it. Try and remember. She said ...’

‘Émile!’

‘Don’t Émile me! She said she was afraid to have a baby, and that if they did Decharme couldn’t stay in the army because he doesn’t earn enough to pay for a wet-nurse and all the rest of the things they’d need. I advised him to get a job selling peanuts. Is that true or not?’

She smiled weakly and tried to make excuses for him.

‘You should get some rest ...’

‘And what did that great booby suggest? Answer! What did he suggest? That part of my estate should be divided up now, since it’s going to have to be done sooner or later! And with his share, he would move to Provence, where it seems the climate would best suit his progeny. Meanwhile, we could go and visit them in the holidays.’

He was not worked up. This was no passing rage. The very opposite! He doled out his words slowly, harshly, one after the other.

‘And what did he add when I was putting my hat on? I want you to say it.’

‘I can’t remember.’

She was near to tears. She put her glass down so that she would not upset it.

‘Say it!’

‘He said you were spending a lot of money on other things.’

‘He didn’t say “other things”.’

‘On ...’

‘Well?’

‘On women ...’

‘Go on.’

‘On her upstairs.’

‘Did you hear that, inspector? Isn’t there anything else you want to ask her? I ask because she’s going to start crying, and that’s no fun for anybody. You can go!’

He sighed again, a long sigh which could only have sprung from that barrel chest.

‘That was just a sample. If you find it entertaining, you can carry on by yourself, without me. I’ll be back on my feet tomorrow, whatever the doctor says. You’ll find me where I am every morning from six onwards, on site. Another glass? You’ve forgotten to take some cigars. Gassin has just brought five hundred through for me, smuggled them in on his boat. As you see, I have no secrets from you.’

He got heavily to his feet, pushing himself up on the arms of his chair.

‘Thank you for all your assistance,’ said Maigret who had tried to find the most prosaic form of words.

There was amusement in Ducrau’s eyes. In the inspector’s too. They stood looking at each other with the same stifled mirth which was full of unspoken thoughts, perhaps of defiance and maybe too of an odd respect.

‘Shall I call the girl to show you out?’

‘No thanks. I know the way.’

They did not shake hands, and that also happened as if by mutual consent. Ducrau remained by the open window, a black shadow against the brightness outside. He was doubtless more tired than he wished to appear, for he was breathing quickly.

‘Good hunting! Maybe you’ll win the twenty thousand francs yourself!’

As he passed the kitchen door, Maigret heard crying coming from inside. He let himself out on to the landing, went down a few steps, stopped in the shaft of sunlight, which had changed place, in order to look at a document from the file he had in his pocket. It was the pathologist’s report, which, among other things, said:

The tentative hypothesis of suicide should be discarded since it is impossible for a man to stab himself with a knife in the place where the wound is situated.

Someone was moving around in the semi-darkness inside the concierge’s lodge. She had just got back.

Emerging on to the pavement outside was like stepping into a bath of heat, light, noise, coloured dust and movement. A number 13 stopped then set off immediately. The bell on the door of the bar to the right rang out, while stones clattered down inside the crushing mill and a small tug with a blue triangle hooted as loudly as it could, venting its fury at the sluice of the lock, which had just been slammed shut in its face.



3.

Above the steam vessel in the middle of the dazzling-blue sign-board flew a swarm of seagulls, and underneath were the words: 'Eagles' Rest. Marne and Haute-Seine River Pilots' Bar.'

It was the bar on the right. Maigret pushed the door open and sat down in a corner, while silence closed in all around him. There were only five men there, sitting around a table, their legs crossed, chairs tilted back, caps pulled down over their eyes because of the sun's glare. Four were wearing blue jerseys with high necks, and all had the same well-tanned skin, with lines so fine they scarcely showed, and hair which was greying on the back of their necks and at the temples.

The man who got up and came over to Maigret was the landlord.

'What'll it be?'

The café was clean. There was sawdust on the floor, the metal surface of the counter gleamed, and everywhere there was that bittersweet smell which signals the aperitif hour.

'Aha!' muttered one of the men as he relit his half-smoked cigarette.

This 'Aha!' was clearly intended for Maigret who had ordered a beer and was gently pressing tobacco down in his pipe. Directly facing him in the group was a shrunk old man with a yellowish beard who drank the contents of his glass in one gulp and as he wiped his moustache grunted:

'Fill her up again, Fernand!'

There was a bandage round his right arm, and this confirmed that he was old man Gassin. The others had started making knowing signs to each other as they

nodded in the direction of the boatman who was glaring at Maigret with such venom that the hairy skin of his face was screwed up tight.

He had been drinking, as was obvious from the fuddled clumsiness of his movements. In Maigret he had smelled police, and his comrades sniggered at his agitated state.

‘Happy days, Gassin!’

By now he was fuming.

‘Seems like you got something to say, a tale to tell to this gentleman!’

And one of the men gave Maigret a wink which meant:

‘Pay no attention! You can see the state he’s in!’

The landlord was perhaps the only one who felt slightly uneasy, but his customers were enjoying themselves hugely, and there was a feeling of genuine friendliness in the air. Through the window, only the railing of the quay was just about visible, along with the masts and helms of barges, and the roof of the lock-keeper’s house.

‘When are you off, then, Gassin?’

Then another man said, in a whisper:

‘Go on, tell him!’

It seemed that his advice would be followed. The old man stood up and with the forced casualness of drunks shambled to the counter.

‘Another one, Fernand!’

He was still watching Maigret. There was something very complex in his expression, for in his look there was a hint of insolence to be sure but also a degree of underlying hopelessness.

The inspector tapped the table with a coin to summon the landlord.

‘What do I owe you?’

Fernand, leaning over the table, told him the amount then added in a whisper:

‘Don’t provoke him. He’s been drunk for two days.’

The words were only half spoken, but from where he was sitting the old man thundered:

‘What you saying?’

Maigret was on his feet. He wasn’t looking for trouble. He put on his most inoffensive expression and made for the door. When he had crossed the road, he

turned and saw Gassin, who was now at the window, glass in hand, watching his every move.

The air was warmer now, and dark gold in colour. A sleeping tramp lay stretched out on the stone flags of the quayside. There was a newspaper over his head.

Cars drove past along with the trucks and trams, but by now Maigret had realized that they were not important. Whatever roared by like this along the road was not part of the landscape. Paris came this way to get to the banks of the Marne, but it was just traffic noise. What really counted was the lock, the hooting of the tugs, the stone-crusher, the barges and the cranes, the two pilots' bars and especially the tall house where he could make out Ducrau's red chair framed by a window.

People felt at home out of doors. Workmen from a crane were sitting on a pile of sand, having a bite to eat. A woman was setting up a table on the deck of her barge, and her neighbour was doing the washing.

The inspector walked unhurriedly down the stone steps and rediscovered the same slow, strong rhythm of things he had felt once before when investigating a crime in Haute-Marne. Even the distinctive smell of the canal prompted images to flash into his mind of barges gliding without breaking the surface of the water.

He was nearly at the *Golden Fleece*, with its hull built of wood coated with red-coloured resin. The deck, which had just been washed, was drying in patches, and the young woman was nowhere to be seen.

Maigret took a couple of steps on the gangplank, turned, saw the old man leaning down over the railing above him. He went on and, once on board, called out:

'Anyone about?'

On a nearby boat, the woman who was doing her washing watched him as he headed towards a double door with blue and red glass panes.

'Hello?'

A short flight of stairs led down to what he could dimly make out as a clean, neat room. In one corner, he could even see a table with a cloth on it.

He continued down the stairs and, when he reached the last step, he came face to face with the young woman with fair hair, who was sitting on a straw-bottomed chair holding a baby to her breast.

It was so unexpected and at the same time so natural a thing that the inspector removed his hat awkwardly, stuffed his still hot pipe into a pocket and took a step back.

‘Oh, I’m sorry ...’

The young woman must have felt scared. She scrutinized him as if she were trying to guess his intentions, but she did not move from where she was, and the child’s tiny mouth remained clamped on her breast.

‘I didn’t know ... I’m in charge of the investigation and I came on board to ask you for some information.’

As Maigret looked at her he felt vaguely uneasy. Some sort of misgiving took root, though he could not say what it was exactly.

Around him, the room was big, with varnished pine everywhere. In one corner was a bed with a quilt over it, and above the headboard hung an ebony crucifix. The middle section of the cabin was used as a dining area, and the table was laid for two.

‘Sit down,’ said the young woman.

Her voice too was quite unexpected, and yet, from Ducrau’s window, Maigret had already had a sense of Aline’s strangeness. From a distance, there seemed to be something ethereal about her.

But she was not slim, nor was she fragile. And close to, her body was noticeably healthy and firm, fully alive. Her features were regular, and her tanned complexion formed a contrast with the fairness of her hair.

So why did the sum of the parts suggest frailty and make one want to protect and console her?

‘Is the child yours?’

For something to say, Maigret nodded towards the baby, whose turned-wood cradle stood next to him.

‘My godson.’

She smiled politely, with a lingering trace of fear.

‘You’re Gassin’s daughter, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

She had a child’s voice and the meekness of a good little girl who is answering the questions she is being asked.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you at this time. Since you were here the day before yesterday when the incident occurred, I would like to know if anyone came on board earlier that evening. Such as Émile Ducrau.’

‘Yes.’

Maigret had not been expecting her response at all and wondered if she had understood the question.

‘You’re sure Ducrau came here on the evening he was attacked?’

‘I didn’t open the door to him.’

‘Did he come on board?’

‘Yes. He called. I was about to go to bed.’

Maigret glimpsed a second cabin, narrower than the first, and the fixed bunk in it. As she spoke, the young woman gently eased the child away from her breast, wiped its chin and then buttoned her blouse.

‘What time was that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was it a long time before your father fell into the canal?’

‘I don’t know.’

She was, for no apparent reason, becoming frightened. She got up to lay the baby in his cradle and as he was opening his mouth and starting to cry, she gave him a red rubber dummy.

‘Do you know Ducrau well?’

‘Yes.’

She stoked the fire in the stove and added salt to a saucepan of potatoes. It was then that for Maigret, as he watched each of her movements closely, the penny dropped. She was not mad perhaps, but there was a veil between her and the external world. Everything about her was insulated, damped down, her actions, her voice, her smile, for she smiled apologetically when she stepped directly in front of her visitor.

‘Do you know what Ducrau came for?’

‘Always the same thing!’

Maigret’s unease deepened, and it made his hands feel clammy. Each of the girl’s words might have serious consequences. With every question he asked, the mystery was becoming less tangled, and yet he was afraid of questioning her.

Did she really understand what she was telling him? Would she say yes to every question?

‘Are you talking about Ducrau’s son?’ he said, to test the hypothesis.

‘Jean didn’t come.’

‘So is it his father who’s been coming to ... see you?’

For a moment her eyes settled on Maigret’s face. Then she looked away.

He wanted to finish this quickly. He was too close to a possible breakthrough to stop now.

‘When he comes here, that’s what he’s after, isn’t it? He pesters you. He tries to ...’

He stopped abruptly, for she was crying, and he did not know what to say next.

‘I’m sorry. Don’t think about it any more.’

She was so close to him that, without thinking, he patted her on her shoulder. But that only made it worse. With a start she recoiled and ran into the second cabin, closing the door behind her. He could still hear her sobbing inside. And the baby who had dropped its dummy started crying too. With an awkward fumble, Maigret replaced the dummy in the child’s mouth.

There was nothing more to be done except leave. The stairs were low, and he banged his head on the top of the hatch. He was expecting to find the old man on deck, but there was no one about except neighbours sitting round a table near the helm, who watched him leave.

There was no sign of Gassin on the quayside either. When he was back up on the pavement, Maigret saw a car pull up outside the tall house. It was an average model, with a medium-sized engine. It had a Seine-et-Oise number plate, and the inspector had only to take one look at the woman who got out to understand what was happening.

It was Ducrau’s daughter. She had her father’s boorish manner and vigour. Her husband, narrow-shouldered in a dark suit, was not in uniform. He closed the car doors and put the key in his pocket.

But they had forgotten something. The woman was already almost over the threshold when she turned. The husband reached for the key again, opened one of the car doors and took out a small packet, which probably contained Spanish grapes, the kind which are bought for invalids.

Eventually the couple entered the house. They were bickering. They were vulgar and without distinction.

Maigret, who was standing at the green tram stop, failed to raise his hand to flag the one that clattered past. His head was full of half-finished thoughts, and he felt as if there was some slight imbalance inside him which he was anxious to correct. The pilots emerged from the bar and shook hands before going their separate ways. One of them, a large man with an open face, walked towards Maigret, who stopped him.

‘Excuse me, may I ask you a question?’

‘I wasn’t there, you know.’

‘It’s not about that. You know Gassin, don’t you? Who is the father of his daughter’s child?’

The pilot burst out laughing.

‘But it’s not hers!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘It was old man Gassin who brought it home one day. He’s been a widower for fifteen years. He must have had the kid up north somewhere, with some woman who runs a bar or keeps a lock.’

‘So his daughter has never had a baby?’

‘Aline? Haven’t you seen her? By the way, go gently with her. She’s not quite like other girls.’

Pedestrians brushed past them. The two men were standing in the full glare of the sun, which was burning the back of Maigret’s neck.

‘They’re decent people. Gassin drinks a bit too much, but you mustn’t think he’s always like he is today. That business the night before last hit him hard. This morning, he thought you were out to get him.’

Still smiling, the big man touched the peak of his cap and walked on. Maigret was going to have lunch too. All round him, there was a change of gear: the stone-crusher had stopped working, the traffic was not as heavy, and it seemed as if even the lock was working at a slower pace.

Obviously, he would have to come back. There was enough to keep him busy for several days in this small world whose distinct character he was only just beginning to get to grips with.

Had Gassin gone back on board? Was he at that moment in that varnished cabin, sitting at the table in front of a white cloth with pink roses on it?

In any case, in the Ducrau household they would surely be arguing, and the Spanish grapes had probably not been enough to restore the invalid's good humour.

Maigret went back into the bar, though he wasn't really sure why. There were no customers. The landlord and his wife, a small, prettyish brunette who had not got round to making herself presentable, were standing at the bar, eating stew. Light was reflected in the tumblers of red wine.

'Back already?' exclaimed Fernand, wiping his mouth.

Maigret had been adopted. He hadn't even needed to say who he was.

'I hope at least you haven't been tormenting that little girl. Beer again? Irma go and fetch up a cold beer.'

He looked out of the window, not on the canal side, but in the direction of the bar across the road.

'Poor old Gassin's going to make himself ill over this business. Mind you, it's no joke falling in the water in the dark and suddenly feeling somebody dragging you down to the bottom ...'

'Has he gone back on board?'

'No, he's over there.'

And the landlord nodded to the other bar, where, in the midst of four men who were still drinking, Gassin was clearly visible, waving his arms about, completely drunk.

'That's what he does, goes from one bar to the other.'

'It looks like he's crying.'

'Yes, he is. He must be on at least his fifteenth aperitif this morning, not counting the tots of rum.'

The landlord's wife brought the ice-cold beer. Maigret sipped it slowly.

'Does his daughter have boyfriends?'

'Aline? No, not her!'

Fernand spoke as if the very idea that Aline could wander off the straight and narrow was the most absurd thing in the whole world. All the same, the fact was that Maigret had seen her feeding a baby, her own or another, but either way she

was no less a young mother who had been frightened by his fatherly gesture and had locked herself in the small cabin.

He felt uneasy at the thought of the old man, dead drunk, crying into his glass, and of the baby lying in its cradle.

‘Do they travel around much?’

‘Twelve months of the year.’

‘Don’t they have any paid hands?’

‘It’s just them. Aline handles the helm as well as any man.’

Maigret had seen those northern canals: straight, verdant banks, poplars lining long lanes of flat water, locks in the middle of nowhere, their crank handles rusting, the poky lock buildings bright with hollyhocks and ducks splashing in the eddies created by the sluices.

He imagined the *Golden Fleece* slowly champing at the ribbon of water hour after hour until it reached some distant unloading quay, with Aline steering, the baby in its cradle, more likely than not out on the deck, near the helm, and the old man on the towpath driving his horses.

An old drunk, a crazy girl and a babe in arms.



4.

When, at six the next morning, Maigret got off the number 13 tram and headed for the lock, Émile Ducrau was already on the unloading wharf, a sailor's cap on his head and a heavy cane in his hand.

As on previous days, thanks to the joys of spring, there was in the air, in the early-morning life of Paris, a child-like playfulness. Certain objects, certain people, the milk bottles on doorsteps, the woman in her white apron setting out her dairy stall, the lorry returning from Les Halles, scattering its last remaining cabbage leaves in its wake, were so many emblems of peace and exuberance.

Could not the same have been said of the Ducraus' maid, framed in a window of the tall house, its façade now gilded by the sun, as she shook out dusters into empty space? Behind her, in the semi-darkness of the living room, the barely perceptible figure of Madame Ducrau came and went, a cotton scarf tied round her head.

On the second floor, the blinds remained closed, and the mind's eye could imagine, striped with bands of sunlight, the bed occupied by Rose, the languid mistress, asleep with arms folded and armpits damp.

Ducrau, already solidly ensconced in the new day, shouted some final exhortation to the master of a barge which was emerging from the lock chamber and beginning to slip down the current of the Seine.

'I was right. You're like me.'

Did he mean that the inspector was also made of the same stuff as those who get up early to organize the work of other men.

'Have you a moment?'

His shoulders were so broad that he looked almost square-shaped. Of course, he was very probably wearing a bandage around his chest. But he moved briskly, and Maigret saw him jump down from the wall of the lock on to the deck of a barge which was more than a metre below him.

‘Morning, Maurice. Did you run across *Eagle IV* above Chalifert? Did they get those seals fixed?’

But he was scarcely listening. Once he had been given the information he’d asked for, he dismissed people with a grunt and turned his attention elsewhere.

‘Hear any more about the accident in Revin culvert?’

Aline was sitting on the deck of the *Golden Fleece* near the helm, grinding coffee and looking vaguely around her. No sooner had Maigret spotted her than Ducrau was at his elbow, with a short-stemmed pipe clenched between his teeth.

‘Are you beginning to make any sense of it?’

A jerk of his chin indicated that he was talking about all the activity in the canal port and the lock, not about the attack on him. He was much more jovial than on the previous evening, and less guarded.

‘You see, there is a three-way junction of waterways connected to the Seine. Here, we are on the Marne canal. Over that way is the River Marne itself – it isn’t used for navigation hereabouts. Finally there is the Upper Seine. The Upper Seine will take you to Burgundy, the Loire, Lyons and Marseilles. Le Havre and Rouen are the most significant towns on the Lower Seine. Two companies share all the freight business: the General and the Centre Canal Company. But from this lock and as far as Belgium, Holland and the Saar, it’s Ducrau’s.’

His eyes were blue and his skin fair in the early-morning sunlight, which bathed the landscape in a rosy glow.

‘The entire block of houses all around mine belongs to me, including the bar, the detached villas and the small dance hall. Also those three cranes over there and the stone-crusher too. And the boat-repair yards on the other side of that footbridge.’

He drank it all in, savouring his delight.

‘They say that altogether the whole lot is worth forty million,’ observed Maigret.

‘You seem rather well informed, give or take five million. Did your men come up with anything yesterday?’

Even saying this gave him delight. In the event, Maigret had sent three inspectors to make detailed inquiries, at Charenton and elsewhere, about Ducrau, his family and everyone who had any connection with what had happened.

The trawl hadn't netted much. The brothel at Charenton confirmed that the canal magnate had been there on the evening the crime was committed. He was often there. He paid for drinks, kidded around with the girls, yarned and frequently went home without asking anything more of them.

As for his son, Jean, people living in the area knew almost nothing about him. He worked at his books. He did not go out often. He seemed like a young man from a good home and his health was delicate.

'Incidentally,' said Maigret, pointing to the *Golden Fleece*, 'I believe it was on that barge that your son spent three months last year?'

Ducrau did not flinch, though he perhaps became a shade more solemn.

'Yes.'

'Was he convalescing?'

'He'd been overdoing it. The doctor prescribed calm and fresh air. The *Golden Fleece* was leaving for Alsace ...'

Aline, holding her coffee-grinder, went inside the cabin, and Ducrau turned away for a moment to give orders to the crane-driver. He did not go far, and Maigret could hear every word they said.

On the daughter and son-in-law, there were only routine details. Captain Decharme was from Le Mans, the son of an accountant. The couple lived in a nice brand-new house on the outskirts of Versailles, and every morning one orderly brought the officer his horse and another cleaned the house.

'Are you going back to Paris?' asked Ducrau as he returned. 'It's as the fancy takes you, but for me, this is always my morning walk, all along the quays.'

He glanced up at his house. The skylights on the sixth floor were still shut, and the curtains had not been opened. The trams were all full, and small carts loaded with vegetables were scurrying into Paris, for the market.

'Can I count on you?' Ducrau called to the lock-keeper.

'All in hand, boss.'

Ducrau winked at Maigret to draw attention to the word 'boss', which was the name by which a public servant called him.

The two men were now strolling along the Seine, where convoys of boats were lining up, using the full width of the river to go about and, propellers thrashing, moving off either upstream or down, with the current.

‘Know what made me my money? I realized that when my boats were lying idle they could be working for me instead. So I bought sand pits and chalk quarries, further north, and then anything that came up for sale, even brick-works, as long as it was next to a waterway!’

He shook the hand of a passing boatman, who merely said:

‘Morning, Mimile.’

The port at Bercy was piled high with barrels, and the arms of the wine town they came from were stamped on all of them.

‘Anything classed as champagne among that lot was carried by me. Hey, Pierrot, is it true that Murier’s old tin tub snagged a pier of the bridge at Château-Thierry?’

‘It’s true enough, boss.’

‘If you see him, tell him it serves him right!’

He walked on, still laughing. On the opposite bank of the river, the enormous concrete buildings of the Magasins Généraux reached into the sky, all straight lines and right angles, while two cargo boats, one from London and the other from Amsterdam, brought a whiff of the high seas into the very heart of Paris.

‘I don’t want to be nosy, but how are you going to proceed with your investigations?’

It was now Maigret’s turn to smile, for this walk clearly had no other purpose than to lead up to this question. Ducrau was aware of it. He sensed that his companion could read his thoughts and he smiled again, faintly, as though he were mocking his own simple-mindedness.

‘As you see, just like this,’ replied Maigret, playing the role of a man out for a relaxed stroll.

They walked on in silence for perhaps another four hundred metres, their eyes trained on the Pont d’Austerlitz, a pyrotechnic display of metal fretwork, from which the architecture of Notre-Dame could be just made out against a blaze of blue and pink.

‘Hey, Vachet! Your brother has broken down at Larzicourt. He said to tell you the christening has been postponed.’

Ducrau went on walking steadily. After a sideways glance at Maigret, he framed a question with the bluntness of a man who likes to put his foot in it on purpose.

‘How much does a man like you earn?’

‘Not much.’

‘Sixty thousand francs?’

‘A lot less than that.’

Ducrau frowned, gave his companion another look, this time with as much admiration as curiosity.

‘What do you make of my wife? Do you think I make her unhappy?’

‘No, not really. If it wasn’t you it would be somebody else. She’s one of those women who are perpetually self-effacing and dreary, whatever fate does to them.’

It was as if Maigret had opened the scoring, because Ducrau was nonplussed.

‘She is dull, dim and vulgar,’ he sighed. ‘Just like her mother, who I’ve settled in one of the small houses nearby. That one has spent her whole life crying! Ah! See that? The stone-crusher, it’s another one of mine. It’s the most powerful in the port of Paris. But seriously, what line of inquiry are you following?’

‘All of them.’

They were still walking, surrounded by the noises of the river and the activity on its banks. The morning air smelled of water and tar. From time to time they had to make a detour around a crane or wait for a gap between two lorries.

‘You’ve been on board the *Golden Fleece*, I assume?’

Ducrau had hesitated for much longer before asking this question than over any of the others and immediately pretended to be engrossed in the movement of a convoy of barges. Actually, the question was unnecessary, because he had watched Maigret go aboard from his window.

‘She’s a very strange mother.’

The effect was dramatic. Ducrau came to a sudden stop. With his short legs and bloated neck, he looked like a bull about to charge.

‘Who the devil told you that?’

‘I didn’t need anybody to tell me.’

‘So?’ he said, to say something. He scowled, clasping his hands behind his back.

‘So nothing.’

‘What did she tell you?’

‘That you went there to see her.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That she wouldn’t open the door. Didn’t you tell me that old Gassin was your very good friend? Yet it looks to me ...’

But Ducrau growled impatiently:

‘Stupid idiot! If I hadn’t grabbed you, you’d have been knocked over by that barrel ...!’

He turned to a member of the crew who had been rolling barrels and boomed:

‘Can’t you be more careful, you idiot?’

So saying, he emptied his pipe by knocking the bowl on the heel of his shoe.

‘I bet you’ve got it into your head that the child is mine! Go on, admit it! Just because I have a reputation for chasing skirts! Well, inspector, this time you’ve got it wrong.’

He spoke the words softly, for a marked change had come over him. He seemed less hard, less sure of himself. He had lost the bombast of the rich man who is showing inferiors around his domain.

‘Do you have kids?’ he asked with that side glance which Maigret was beginning to recognize.

‘I only ever had a little girl. She died.’

‘Well I have! Now look, I’m not going to ask you to promise not to tell anyone, but if you are unwise enough to say a single word, I’ll smash your face in! For a start, I’ve got the two you know about. The girl is as pathetic as her mother. Then there’s the boy. I’m not sure about him yet, but I can’t see him amounting to much. Have you met him? No? Quiet, shy, affectionate, and always ill. So much for them. But, second, I have another daughter. You mentioned Gassin just now. He’s a good man, though that didn’t stop me from sleeping with his amazing wife. He doesn’t know. If he did, he’d go berserk, because when he goes to Paris he never comes back without taking flowers to the cemetery.

‘And it’s been sixteen years!’

By now they had crossed the Pont de la Tournelle and were just walking on to the Ile Saint-Louis, that haven of provincial peace. As they passed, a boatman in

a sailor's cap emerged from a café and ran after Ducrau. Maigret stepped to one side while they exchanged a few words and as he waited his retina continued to display an image of an Aline who was more unreal than ever.

Only a little while earlier he had been picturing the *Golden Fleece* gliding along gleaming canals, the blonde girl at the helm, the old man driving his horses on the towpath and, on deck, lying in a hammock or stretched out on the sun-warmed, resinous cargo of logs, a much too bookish convalescent.

'That's fine for a week on Sunday,' came Ducrau's voice from behind him.

And for Maigret's benefit, he added:

'A little party he's organizing at Nogent for one of my men who's been working on the same barge for thirty years.'

He was hot. They had been walking for more than an hour. Shopkeepers were raising their blinds and typists who were late were scurrying along the pavement.

Ducrau stopped speaking. Perhaps he was waiting for Maigret to pick up the conversation where they had left it, but the inspector seemed lost in thought.

'I'm sorry for dragging you all this way. Do you know the Henri IV, the tobacconist's in the middle of the Pont-Neuf? It's not far from the Police Judiciaire. But I bet you never knew it's also a café? Five or six of us, sometimes more, meet up there every day. It's a kind of club or guild for shippers.'

'Has Aline always been mad?'

'She's not mad. Either you weren't seeing straight or else you know nothing about such things. Her trouble is more a kind of late development. Yes, that's how the doctor explained it, very clearly. She's nineteen, and you can say she's got a mental age of a girl of ten. But she can still make up for lost time. They said there was some hope it would happen after she ... had the baby.'

He had spoken the words in a whisper, shamefacedly.

'Does she know you are her father?'

He gave a start, his face suddenly crimson.

'Whatever happens, you must never say that to her! In the first place, she wouldn't believe you. And secondly, Gassin must never, and I mean absolutely never, suspect!'

At this time of day, if he was up and about as early as he was the day before, the old boatman would no doubt be drunk in one or other of the two bars.

'And you believe he doesn't suspect anything?'

‘Positive.’

‘And does anyone else ...?’

‘Nobody has ever known, except me.’

‘Is this the reason why the *Golden Fleece* spends longer loading or unloading than the other boats?’

The answer was so obvious that Ducrau shrugged his shoulders and then, with a different tone in his voice and with a different expression on his face, he said:

‘Cigar? Let’s not discuss this any more, if you don’t mind.’

‘But what if it’s the key to what happened?’

‘That is not true!’

He was categorical, almost threatening.

‘Come inside with me. I’ll only be two minutes.’

They were now at the Henri IV. The drinkers leaning on the bar were ordinary boatmen. But there was a second room divided off by a partition wall. There, Ducrau shook hands with one or two customers. He did not introduce Maigret to them.

‘Is it true that somebody accepted Charleroi coal at a rate of fifty-two francs?’

‘A Belgian. He operates with three motorized boats.’

‘Waiter! Half a bottle of white wine! You drink white wine?’

Maigret nodded and smoked his pipe as he watched the comings and goings on the Pont-Neuf, with only half an ear on the conversation being carried on. It was some time before he was aware of an unusual hum in the air and even longer before he realized that it was a barge hooter. It did not sound two or three times, as is usual when a boat passes a bridge, but emitted a single, continuous sound so protracted that passers-by stopped, as surprised as the inspector.

The landlord of the Henri IV was the first to look up. Two boatmen followed him to the door, where Maigret had taken up a position.

A barge powered by a diesel engine was coming downstream. It slowed when it saw the arches of the Pont-Neuf and went into reverse to check its way. The hooter was still sounding and, while the wife took the helm, her husband jumped into the dinghy and rowed smartly towards the bank.

‘It’s François!’ said one of the boatmen.

They all walked down on to the quayside and were standing above the stone wall when the wherry touched land. The woman at the helm was having

difficulty keeping the long boat on a straight course.

‘Is the boss there?’

‘In the café’

‘Got to tell him, break it gently – don’t ask me how – but don’t come out with it too sudden, it’s his son ...’

‘Well?’

‘He’s been found dead ... It’s all a big mess back there. Seems he ...’

A gruesome movement of his hand across his throat. He didn’t need to say more.

Besides, a tug coming upstream was hooting because the barge had now strayed into its lane, and the boatman wasted no time in pushing his wherry out again.

A few people who had stopped on the bridge were already moving off, but down on the quayside three men stood staring at each other, not knowing what to do. Their unease increased when they saw Ducrau at the door of the Henri IV, from which he was trying to see what was going on.

‘Is it for me?’

He was so accustomed to it always being for him! Was he not one of the five or six men who ruled the world of water?

Maigret preferred to leave it to the men, who wavered, nudging each other with their elbows until one of them, out of desperation, stammered:

‘Boss, you got to go back straight away. It’s ...’

Ducrau looked at Maigret, with a frown on his face.

‘It’s what?’

‘Trouble at home ...’

‘Well, what sort of trouble?’

He was getting angry now. It seemed as if he suspected them all of something.

‘It’s Jean ...’

‘Spit it out, man!’

‘He’s dead!’

This was happening in the doorway of a café in the middle of the Pont-Neuf, in bright sunshine, with glasses of golden wine still standing on the bar and the landlord with his sleeves rolled up and the multicoloured display of cigarette packets.

Ducrau looked around him with eyes so blank that it was as if he had not understood. His chest heaved, but all that came out was a faint sneer.

‘It’s not true!’ he said, and his eyes began to brim.

‘That was François, he’d come down from the port, he stopped to say ...’

Though short, he was enormous, so broad, so solid that no one would have dared offer him their sympathy. Yet he turned to look at Maigret with eyes full of distress, then snorted and barked at the men he had been talking to:

‘I’ll do it for forty-eight!’

But even as he spoke the words, thus allowing Maigret to see his hard-boiled toughness, his face wore an expression of helpless, childish pride. With a wave of his arm, he flagged down a red taxi. He did not stop to ask the inspector to get in with him, for he assumed that such a thing was too natural to need saying. As natural as not speaking!

‘The lock at Charenton!’

They drove back along the Seine, where only an hour before he had described the life of the river boat by boat, mooring-ring by mooring-ring. He still looked out at it now but without seeing it, and they were already approaching the gates of the port at Bercy when he burst out:

‘The stupid little fool!’

The last word was choked off. There was a sob in his throat, and he kept it there, not letting it out until he reached his front door.

The port beneath the lock looked different. People had recognized the boss through the windows of the taxi.

The lock-keeper stopped cranking the sluices so that he could remove his cap. On the quayside, workmen stood still, as if life had been suspended. A foreman was waiting for him by the door.

‘Were you the one who stopped the crusher?’

‘I thought ...’

Ducrau was first to start up the stairs. Maigret followed. He heard footsteps and voices coming from much higher up. A door on the first floor opened, and Jeanne Ducrau flung herself into her husband’s arms. She was limp. He straightened her up, looked round for something to support her, deposited her like a parcel in the care of a fat neighbour who was snivelling.

He continued up the stairs. Oddly enough, he turned round to check if Maigret was still with him. Between the third and fourth floors, they met a police inspector coming down, who took off his hat and began:

‘Monsieur Ducrau, may I say ...’

‘Dammit!’

He swept him aside and continued up the stairs.

‘Detective Chief Inspector, I ...’

‘Later,’ growled Maigret.

‘He left a note which ...’

‘Give it to me!’

He grabbed it literally on the wing and pushed it into his pocket. Only one thing really counted: the man climbing the stairs, his breath laboured, who stopped outside a door with a brass knob, which was opened at once to admit him.

It was an attic room. The light entered from above, and fine dust particles danced in a shaft of sunlight. There was a table with books on it, a chair covered with the same red plush as the one downstairs.

The doctor was seated at the table signing the preliminary report and was too late to prevent Ducrau from snatching back the sheet that covered the body of his son.

He did not say anything, not one word. He seemed more surprised than anything else, as if he had been confronted by some inexplicable sight. And utterly inexplicable it was, a strange ruination: a tall, slim young man whose pallid white chest was visible through a gap in the jacket of his pyjamas, which were blue with thin stripes. Around his neck was a wide blue circle. His features were horribly convulsed.

Ducrau took a step forwards, perhaps to kiss the dead boy, but he did not do so. He seemed frightened. He looked away, at the ceiling, then at a spot by the door.

‘From the attic window,’ the doctor said quietly.

He had hanged himself, at first light, and it was his parents’ maid, bringing him his breakfast as she always did, who had found him.

At the same moment, Ducrau, showing surprising presence of mind, turned to Maigret and barked:

‘The letter!’

So he had seen and heard everything during those terrible moments as he climbed the stairs!

The inspector took the letter from his pocket, and his companion grabbed it from his hands and read it at a glance then lowered his arms wearily.

‘How stupid can anyone be!’

That was all. And it was truly what he thought. It sprang from the depths of his soul, more tragic than any number of rolling phrases.

‘Read it, then!’

He turned his anger on Maigret, who had not been quick enough to pick up the note which had fallen on to the floor.

I was the one who attacked my father and I have taken the law into my own hands. I say sorry to everyone. Mother must not be sad.

Jean

For the second time, Ducrau was overcome by a fit of laughter which left him gasping.

‘Can you imagine?’

He had not protested when the doctor had put the sheet back over the body and was not sure whether he should stay there, go downstairs, stand or walk about.

‘It’s not true!’ he said once again.

Eventually, he laid a large hand on Maigret’s shoulder, a heavy, weary hand.

‘I’m thirsty!’

His cheeks were almost purple, his forehead glistened with sweat, and his hair was stuck to his temples. And the undeniable smell of ether, which had been used on a woman who had fainted, filled that attic room.



5.

It was shortly before nine o'clock the following morning when Maigret arrived at the Police Judiciaire to be told by the office boy that there had already been a phone call for him.

'They gave no name but said they'd call back.'

On top of the pile of mail was a duty report.

The assistant lock-keeper at Charenton was found dead this morning, hanging by the neck from the upper sluice gate.

Maigret did not even have time to be shocked, for the phone was already ringing. He picked up the receiver irritably and was very surprised when he recognized the voice at the other end of the line, which spoke simply, with deference and even a hint of unexpected diffidence.

'Hello? Is that you, inspector? It's Ducrau. Would you be so good as to come to see me here? I'd come to you, but it wouldn't be the same ... Are you still there? ... I'm not at Charenton. I'm at the office, 33 Quai des Célestins ... You're coming? ... I'm most obliged.'

Every morning for the last ten days, the same sun had shone with the tart aftertaste of gooseberries. There was a stronger smell of springtime in the air along the Seine than elsewhere, and when Maigret reached Quai des Célestins he cast an envious glance at a student and several elderly gentlemen who were rummaging through the dusty boxes of the booksellers.

Number 33 was a building on three floors, already old. Fixed to the door were several brass plates. The interior had the typical feel of those small town-houses which have been converted into offices. There were notices on the doors:

Cashier, Office and so on. Directly in front of the inspector was a staircase which led up to the first floor, and it was at the top of it that Ducrau appeared as Maigret was looking round for someone to ask.

‘Would you come this way?’

He took his visitor into a drawing room which had become an office. It had retained its moulded ceiling, the large mirrors and gilt decoration, but it all had an old-fashioned look and clashed with the plain deal furniture.

‘Did you read the brass plates?’ asked Ducrau, motioning Maigret to a chair. ‘Downstairs is the Marne Quarry Company. Here it’s towing, and upstairs handles river and canal transportation. That’s what the name Ducrau is all about!’

But he said it without pride, as if this information was no longer of importance. He was sitting with his back to the light and Maigret noticed that he was wearing a black armband on one sleeve of his heavy blue jacket. He had not shaved, with the result that his cheeks looked flabbier.

He sat for a moment without speaking, fiddling with his pipe, which had gone out. It was at this point that Maigret realized that there were in fact two distinct Ducraus, one who boasted, even to himself, talked loudly and puffed his chest out in an endless theatrical display, and another who would suddenly forget to watch himself and was a quite shy, awkward man.

But he obviously found it difficult to be that Ducrau! He had a pressing need to stay a notch above ordinary reality. Already his eyes had that spark in them which heralded a new burst of play-acting.

‘I come to the office as little as possible. There are enough minions to get through the work that’s done here. This morning, I just didn’t know where else to hide.’

He felt irritated by Maigret’s silence and passivity because, to play his part, he needed the reactions of others to respond to.

‘Know where I spent last night? In a hotel in Rue de Rivoli! Because they all descended on the house: the wife’s elderly mother, my daughter, her moronic husband, not to mention the neighbours! They turned it into a funereal carnival, so I decided to make myself scarce!’

He meant it. Even so, he was pleased with the word ‘carnival’.

‘I just trailed around. I’m sick of myself. Does it ever happen to you, to feel sick of yourself?’

And then he suddenly snatched from the table a newspaper which was several days old, got to his feet, stood over Maigret and pushed the paper under his nose, using a fingernail to point out a brief paragraph.

‘Did you see this?’

We have learned that Divisional Chief Inspector Maigret, of the Police Judiciaire, although still some way off the age limit, has applied for, and been given, early retirement. He will leave his post next week and is likely to be replaced by Chief Inspector Ledent.

‘Well?’ said Maigret, rather taken aback.

‘So how many days have you got left? Six, isn’t it?’

He did not sit down. He needed to walk. He walked up and down, sometimes with his back to the light and sometimes facing the window, with his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his waistcoat.

‘I asked you yesterday how much the police force paid you, remember? Well today I can tell you this: I know you better than you think. As of next week, I am ready to offer you a hundred thousand francs a year to come and work for me. Wait before you answer.’

With an impatient gesture he opened a door and beckoned to the inspector to join him. In the light-filled office, a man of thirty years of age with already receding hair was sitting in front of a pile of files. There was a long cigarette-holder in his mouth. A secretary was ready to take dictation.

‘The head of towage,’ declared Ducrau as the man got hurriedly to his feet.

The shipping magnate added:

‘Don’t let me disturb you, Monsieur Jaspar. (He stressed the *Monsieur*.) But since you’re here, tell me again what it is you do every evening. Because, if I’m not mistaken, you are a champion at something or other.’

‘Crosswords.’

‘Is that so! Perfect! Did you hear that, inspector? Monsieur Jaspar, head of towage, at thirty-two years of age, is a crossword champion!’

He had pronounced each syllable separately and on the last he slammed the door shut violently and then stood facing Maigret, looking him straight in the eye.

‘Did you see that knuckle-head? There are more like him downstairs and up on the next floor, all neatly turned-out, respectable, and what is called hard-working. You can be sure that at this very moment Monsieur Jaspar is going green at the gills wondering what he can have done to get on the wrong side of me. His secretary will spread what happened all round the building, and they’ll all spend the next ten days drooling over it like it was chocolate. Just because I give them a title like department head they honestly believe they’re in charge of something. Cigar?’

There was a box of Havanas on the mantelpiece, but the inspector preferred his pipe, which he filled.

‘I wouldn’t give you a title. You’re beginning to get some idea of what my business is about. Carriage of freight on the one hand, that is towage, and then the quarries and the rest of it. Actually the rest could be built up in all sorts of ways. I’d let my staff know that you are to be given a free hand. You’d come and go as and when you liked. You’d stick your nose into everything ...’

Once more, Maigret saw in his mind’s eye long canals lined with trees, old women in black straw hats and tip-up-trucks making their way towards the barges. Ducrau had rung a bell, and a secretary had stepped smartly in, her dictation pad at the ready.

‘Take this down. *We the undersigned, Émile Ducrau and Maigret ... first name? ... and Maigret, Joseph, are in agreement as follows. As of 18 March next, Monsieur Joseph Maigret shall become an employee of ...*’

He looked at Maigret, frowned then spoke sharply to the secretary:

‘You can go!’

He paced round the room, hands behind his back, darting anxious glances at his companion, who, however, had not said a word.

‘Well?’ he said finally.

‘No go.’

‘A hundred and fifty thousand? Ah no! It’s not about money.’

He opened the window, exposing the room to the rumble of the city. It was warm. He tossed his cigar into empty space.

‘Why are you leaving the force?’

Maigret smiled as he puffed on his pipe.

‘But you must admit you’re not the type who can sit still doing nothing.’

Deflated, impatient, his temper began to rise, and yet the way he looked at Maigret was full of respect and goodwill.

‘Nor has that got anything to do with money either.’

Maigret looked towards the door of the adjacent office, at the ceiling, at the floor, and murmured:

‘Maybe my reasons are the same as yours?’

‘You mean you’ve got a lot of morons working for you too?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

The inspector was in a good mood, or rather he was fully himself. He felt on top form. It was a state of heightened receptivity which allowed him to think what the other person was thinking, and sometimes even before he thought it.

Ducrau did not exactly give up and retreat. But he lost confidence, gave ground, and the effort was visible in his face.

‘I bet you believe you’re doing your duty,’ he growled waspishly.

And then, with renewed energy, he added:

‘It looks as if I’m trying to buy you. Fair enough. But let’s just suppose I put the same question to you next week?’

Maigret shook his head. Ducrau would gladly have shaken him furiously, affectionately. The phone rang.

‘Yes, speaking ... What about it? ... Funeral directors? I don’t give a damn about funeral directors! If you bother me again, I won’t go to the funeral!’

But all the same, he had turned pale.

‘A lot of hoo-ha,’ he sighed, screwing up his nose with distaste after replacing the receiver. ‘They’re all there, flapping round the boy, who, if he could, would send them packing. You’d never guess where I went last night. If I said, people would treat me like a monster. But it was in a common brothel that I was at last able to cry my eyes out, surrounded by women who thought I was drunk and helped themselves from my wallet.’

He no longer needed to remain standing. It was over. He sat down, ran his hand through his hair the wrong way and leaned his elbows on the desk. He tried to pick up the thread of his ideas and though he continued looking at Maigret he did not seem to register his presence. The inspector allowed him a moment’s respite, then murmured:

‘Did you know someone else has been found hanged at Charenton?’

Ducrau raised his heavy eyelids and waited for the rest.

‘A man you probably know because he was one of the lock-keeper’s assistants ...’

‘Bébert?’

‘I couldn’t say if it was Bébert, but they found him this morning, hanging from the upper lock gate.’

Ducrau sighed like a man who is dog-tired.

‘Have you anything to say on this new development?’

Ducrau shrugged his shoulders.

‘I could ask you to be specific about where you were last night.’

This time, a smile flickered on the lips of the canal boss, and he seemed about to say something. But he changed his mind at the last moment and gave another shrug.

‘Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me?’

‘What day is it today?’

‘Thursday.’

‘On what day next week are you due to leave the force?’

‘Wednesday.’

‘Let me ask something else. What if your investigation isn’t over and done with by then: what will happen?’

‘I’ll hand over my case-notes to a colleague, who’ll take it from there.’

The smile on Ducrau’s face grew wider and with almost boyish glee he said softly:

‘A moron?’

Maigret couldn’t help smiling too.

‘They’re not all knuckle-heads.’

And there they had to leave matters, on this unexpectedly upbeat note. Ducrau got to his feet and held out an enormous hand.

‘Goodbye, inspector. No doubt I’ll be seeing you again between now and then.’

Maigret shook his hand and stared directly into his companion’s blue eyes but failed to wipe the smile off the man’s face, perhaps merely causing his mask to slip slightly.

‘Until then.’

Ducrau walked him back to the landing and even remained leaning over the banister. When Maigret emerged into the blinding warmth of the quays, he had a feeling that a pair of eyes was following him from a high window.

And it was the smile on his own face which faded as he waited for a tram.

It was the concierge's idea, thinking she was doing the right thing: all the tenants in the house had closed their blinds as a sign of mourning. The boats moored in the port all had their flags at half mast. As a result the canal had a morbid look about it.

Movement of any kind felt questionable. There were curious bystanders everywhere, especially on the walls of the lock, and in the end they all pointed to one of the brackets and rather shamefacedly asked:

'Is that where ...?'

The corpse had already been taken to the Forensic Institute, a long, bony body which had been a familiar sight to Marne canal regulars for a long time.

No one knew where Bébert had come from, and he had no family. He had fitted out a nook in a Waterways Department dredger which for the last ten years had been gently rusting in a quiet corner of the port.

He would catch mooring ropes thrown from barges; he cranked the sluices and gates open and shut; he helped out in small ways and collected tips. That was all.

The lock-keeper was moving around his territory looking important because that same morning three reporters had interviewed him, and one of them had taken his picture.

As soon as Maigret got off the tram, he walked into Fernand's bar, where there were more customers than usual. Voices sank to a whisper. Those who knew him told the others what he did for a living. The landlord came up to him, his manner familiar.

'A beer? Not too much of a head on it?'

With a wink he motioned to the far corner of the bar. Old Gassin was there, as bad-tempered as a sick dog, his eyes even more red-rimmed than ever.

He stared at Maigret, never taking his eyes off him, but on the contrary screwed his face into a grimace intended to express his disgust.

But the inspector swallowed a large mouthful of cold beer, wiped his mouth and started filling a fresh pipe. Through the bar's window, behind Gassin, he

could see the barges moored one against the other and was vaguely disappointed not to catch a sight of Aline.

The landlord leaned close to him again and pretended to wipe the top of a table to give him an opportunity to mutter:

‘You ought to do something, give him a hand. He doesn’t even hardly know where he is any more. See those bits of paper on the floor? It’s the notification to go and get loaded up on the Quai de la Tournelle. That’s what he did with it!’

But the old drunk knew very well they were talking about him and he stood up, unsteady on his legs, approached Maigret, looked him defiantly in the eye and then went off, elbowing the landlord out of his way.

They saw him hesitate when he reached the door. For a moment, it looked as if he might rush out into the road without seeing the bus that was bearing down on him. But he swayed for a moment before making straight for the bar opposite, while all the customers watched.

‘What did you make of that, inspector?’

The conversation became general. People talked to Maigret as if they had known him a long time.

‘... on top of which, old Gassin is the straightest, most decent man you could wish to meet. But it looks like he hasn’t quite got over his experience of the other night, and I can’t help wondering if he’ll ever shake it off. And what do you think about Bébert? Is it number two in a series or what?’

They were friendly and familiar. They weren’t taking the latest turn of events too seriously. Even so, when they laughed, there was a slight edge to the sound.

Maigret just nodded and replied with smiles and grunts.

‘Is it true the boss won’t be going to the funeral?’

So the news had already reached the bar! And it was not quite an hour since the phone call had taken place!

‘He’s a hard-headed one, all right! Hard as they come! But have you heard that someone saw Bébert at the Gallia cinema yesterday? Must have been after that he was jumped, just as he was getting back on the dredger.’

‘I was at the cinema too,’ someone said.

‘Did you see him?’

‘I didn’t see him but I was there.’

‘So what does that prove?’

‘It proves I was there!’

Maigret smiled as he got to his feet. He paid and waved a general goodbye to all. He had instructed two inspectors to dig up anything that was relevant and now, on the other side of the water, he thought he made out one of them, Lucas, looking around the Waterways dredger.

He walked past Ducrau’s house. Ever since that morning and maybe since the previous evening, the Decharmes’ car had been parked at the kerb. He could have gone in, but what was the point? He could imagine all too clearly what Ducrau had called their ‘carnival’.

He sauntered along. He knew nothing for sure. He was not exactly thinking but he felt that something was taking shape in his mind which he shouldn’t try to force.

He turned round when he heard someone hailing a taxi. It was the concierge. Moments later a blowzy young woman with red-rimmed eyes, wearing black silk and looking upset, stepped into it while the concierge piled suitcases on to the back seat.

It had to be Rose! It was enough to make anyone smile! Maigret was still smiling when he walked up to the concierge, who gave him a starchy look.

‘Was that the lady from the second floor?’

‘And who might you be?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.’

‘Then you know the answer as well as I do.’

‘Was it the son-in-law who told her to leave?’

‘Well, it wasn’t me. Anyway, it’s their business.’

It was obvious. The family upstairs, in their mourning clothes, whispering for hours trying to decide whether it was proper or not to let the creature stay in the house in such solemn circumstances. And no doubt Captain Decharme had been delegated to convey to her the verdict reached by the family council.

It was entirely by chance that Maigret stopped by the sign saying *Dance Hall* in white lettering on a large blue metal panel. Outside the recessed door were climbing plants, which supplied a fresh, country note and made it feel like a suburban *café dansant*. Inside it was dark and cool after the dazzling pavement, and the brass flourishes on the mechanical piano sparkled like real diamonds.

There were a few tables, some benches then an empty space and, on one wall, an old backcloth which had once seen service as scenery in a theatre.

‘Who’s there?’ a voice called from the top of the stairs.

‘Someone.’

The owner of the voice was finishing getting washed, for a tap was running and water was heard splashing in a wash-basin. A woman in slippers and dressing gown came down.

‘Ah!’ she murmured. ‘It’s you.’

Like everyone else in Charenton, she already knew about Maigret. She had once been pretty. Now on the stout side and sapped by a life spent in this hothouse, she nevertheless still had a certain charm, which was a mix of unconcern and an equable temperament.

‘You want something to drink?’

‘Pour us both an aperitif. Doesn’t matter what.’

She drank gentian-bitters. She had a particular way of putting both elbows together and leaning them on the table so that her breasts pressed against each other and were half pushed out of her dressing gown.

‘I thought you’d come. Your very good health!’

She wasn’t afraid. The police did not impress her.

‘Is it true what they’re saying?’

‘About what?’

‘About Bébert, Oh, I’m talking too much. What the hell. Not to mention that none of it is at all certain. They’re saying old man Gassin was the one ...’

‘... who did it?’

‘At least he talks about it as if he knew. Another glass?’

‘What about Ducrau?’

‘What about him?’

‘Didn’t he come here yesterday?’

‘He often comes, to keep me company. We go back a long way, even though he’s now a rich man. He’s not proud. He sits where you’re sitting now. We both have a drink. From time to time he’ll ask me for a five-*sou* piece for the piano.’

‘Was he here yesterday?’

‘Yes. There’s dancing only on Saturdays and Sundays and sometimes on a Monday. I don’t usually close on the other days, but I’m here more or less on my

own. When my husband was around things were different, because we served food.'

'What time did he leave?'

'So that's how you're thinking? Well let me tell you: you've got it all wrong. I know him. He used to cosy up to me now and then when all he had was the one tug. But he never ever tried anything more on with me, why I couldn't tell you. Still, that's how it was ... But you know this as well as I do! Yesterday, he was very down ...'

'Did he drink much?'

'Two, maybe three glasses, but that much has no effect on him. He said: "If you only knew how sick I am of those morons! I fancy a night just hanging around in some whorehouse. When I think of them all up there crowding round my boy ..."'

This time, Maigret did not smile when he found the morons cropping up again. He looked around at the shabby walls, the tables, the benches, the backcloth and then at this good, decent woman who was now slowly sipping the last of her second gentian.

'You really don't know what time he left?'

'Maybe midnight? Perhaps earlier? But I'll say one thing: it's a sad thing to have all that money and not be happy!'

Maigret still did not smile.



6.

‘The strange thing,’ said Maigret, ‘is that I’m convinced that this whole business is actually very simple.’

They were in the office belonging to the commissioner of the Police Judiciaire at that time of day when the rest of the building is empty. A crimson sun was sinking over Paris, and the Seine, straddled by the Pont-Neuf, was splashed with red, blue and deep yellow. The two men were standing by a window, chatting in a desultory fashion.

‘As for my man ...’

The phone rang. The commissioner picked up the receiver.

‘Hello? ... Are you keeping well? ... I’ll give him to you ...’

It was Madame Maigret. She was in something of a state.

‘You forgot to phone ... You did! We agreed that you’d phone at four ... Anyway, the furniture has got there and I have to go. Can you come home straight away?’

Before he left, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret explained to the commissioner:

‘I’d forgotten we were moving house today. The removal van came for the furniture yesterday. My wife has to be in the country to see to it.’

The commissioner shrugged, and Maigret, who noticed, stopped in the doorway.

‘What are you thinking, chief?’

‘That you’ll be just like all the rest, by which I mean that within a year you’ll be back to work, only this time it will be for a bank or some insurance company.’

That evening, in the gathering dark, the office had a gloominess about it, a pervasive melancholy which both men pretended not to notice.

‘You have my word that I won’t!’

‘I’ll see you tomorrow. Remember, no slip-ups with Ducrau. He’s bound to have two or three members of the Assembly in his pocket.’

Maigret took a taxi and a few minutes later was in his apartment in Rue Richard-Lenoir. His wife was rushing around. Two rooms were empty and in the others assorted bundles were piled high on the furniture. Something was simmering, not on the cooker which had already gone, but on a spirit stove.

‘And you really can’t come with me? Well, you’ll just have to get the train tomorrow evening then. We have to decide where the furniture will go.’

Not only was it not possible for him to go with her, Maigret didn’t want to. It certainly gave him an odd feeling to come back to their ravaged home, which they were about to leave for ever, but odder still was the sight of certain objects which his wife was packing up to take away and the running commentary which she kept up as she busied around.

‘Have you seen those folding chairs they delivered? What’s the time now? Madame Bigaud herself phoned about the furniture. She says the weather is wonderful and the cherry trees are white with blossom. The goat she told us about isn’t for sale, but the owner will give us a kid if there is one this year.’

Maigret, who smiled approvingly, was not in the mood.

‘Eat up!’ cried Madame Maigret from the next room. ‘I’m not hungry.’

Neither was he. He picked at his food. Then he took the bulky, awkward items downstairs – there were even garden tools! They filled a taxi.

‘Gare d’Orsay.’

On the platform, he kissed his wife at the door of her carriage and at about eleven o’clock found himself alone by the Seine, feeling cross about something or somebody.

A little further along, on Quai des Célestins, he walked past Ducrau’s offices. There were no lights showing. The slanting illumination from a gas lamp made the brass plates gleam. And all along the riverbanks boats were lying indolently on the water.

Why had the chief said that to him? It was stupid! Maigret genuinely longed for the countryside, peace and quiet, books ... He was exhausted.

Yet he could not for the life of him keep his thoughts on what his wife had talked about. He tried to remember what she had said about the goat and various other things. But actually all he wanted now was to watch the swarm of lights on the opposite side of the Seine.

‘I wonder where Ducrau is at this time of night. Did he go home in the end, despite hating all the “carnival”? Is he having dinner, elbows on the table, in an expensive restaurant or in some truck-drivers’ café? Is he trailing from one bawdy-house to another, wearing his mourning for his son on his sleeve?’

They had found nothing on Jean Ducrau, zero! There are people like that, individuals about whom no one has anything to say. Two inspectors had been on his case. They had made inquiries in the Quartier Latin, in the École de chartes and around Charenton.

‘A delightful young man, a little withdrawn, has poor health ...’

He was not known to have any bad habits or to be passionate about anything. No one knew what he did of an evening.

‘He must have stayed in, catching up with his work, because since his illness he’d found it hard to work.’

No family life. No friends. No girlfriend. And then one fine morning he hangs himself, accusing himself of trying to kill his father!

Still, there were those three months spent on board the *Golden Fleece* with Aline.

Jean ... Aline ... Gassin ... Ducrau ...

Maigret recognized the gates at Bercy and then, on the right, the chimney stacks of the power station. Trams clattered past him. At times he would pause for no reason and then set off again.

A long way off Lock No. 1 awaited him, as did the tall house, the barges, the two bars, the small dance hall that made up a stage set or rather a self-contained world heavy with reality, smells and snarled-up lives which he was trying to untangle.

It was his last case. The furniture had been delivered to their little place on the banks of the Loire.

He hadn’t kissed his wife properly when he left her. He had carried their possessions with bad grace. He had not even waited for the train to start moving.

Why had the chief said that?

On an impulse, he jumped on a tram instead of continuing on his uncertain way along the quays on foot.

The landscape looked all the emptier for being lit by a moon which illuminated its darkest corners. The bar on the left was already closed, and in the other, Fernand's, three men were playing cards with him.

When Maigret walked past on the pavement, they all heard the sound of his footsteps from inside. Fernand looked up and must have recognized the inspector, for he opened the door for him.

'Still here at this time of night? Nothing else has happened, I hope?'

'Nothing new.'

'Won't you have a drink?'

'No thanks.'

'Suit yourself. We were just chatting ...'

Maigret stepped inside, feeling that he was making a mistake. The players were waiting, their cards in their hands. The landlord poured himself a glass of white-brandy then a second for him.

'Cheers!'

'Are you playing or not?'

'Coming! If you don't mind excusing me, inspector ...?'

Maigret remained standing, sensing that something strange was going on.

'Won't you pull up a chair? A trump!'

Maigret looked through the window but saw nothing but the utterly still scene outside and the moon outlining the contours of things.

'Odd isn't it, this business with Bébert?'

'Play! You can talk later.'

'How much do I owe you?' asked Maigret.

'On the house.'

'No ...'

'On me. Just wait a second and then I'm all yours! Belote!'

He laid down his cards and headed for the counter.

'What'll you have? Another of the same? And what about you, boys?'

There was something in the air, in their manner and voices, that was not frank and open. It was particularly true of the landlord, who was doing his level best to

prevent silence breaking out.

‘Did you know Gassin is still as drunk as ever? Looks like he’s going for the full novena! A large one, Henry? And what about you?’

The only sign of life on the sleeping quayside came from the bar. Maigret, who was trying to keep an eye on what was happening inside and outside, made his way to the door.

‘Oh, by the way, inspector, I just wanted to tell you ...’

‘Tell me what?’ he snapped as he turned round.

‘Wait a moment ... No, it’s gone ... Stupid of me ... What’ll you have?’

It was so obvious that his friends looked at him in embarrassment. Fernand himself felt it too, and his cheeks turned a deeper red.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Maigret.

‘What do you mean?’

He held the door open and stared out at the boats embedded in the canal.

‘Why are you trying to keep me here?’

‘Me? I swear ...’

And then at last Maigret dimly made out, in the bulky shadow formed by the dark hulls, masts and cabins, a faint glimmer of light. Without stopping to close the door behind him, he strode across the quayside and found himself at the gangway of the *Golden Fleece*.

A man was standing not two metres away. Maigret almost didn’t see him.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Waiting for my fare.’

As he turned, Maigret saw that a little further along stood a taxi without lights.

Under his weight, the narrow gangplank creaked as it shifted position. There was a faint light behind the glass panes in the door. He opened it without hesitating and put one foot on the steps.

‘May I come in?’

He sensed a presence. After a few steps, he could see the whole of the cabin, which was lit by an oil-lamp. The blankets on the bed had been made up for the night. On the waxed tablecloth was a bottle and two glasses.

Two men were sitting facing each other, silent and watchful, old Gassin, whose eyes were full of menace, and, elbows on the table, Émile Ducrau, who had pushed his cap to the back of his head.

‘Come in, inspector! I thought you might turn up ...’

This wasn’t bravado. He was neither embarrassed nor surprised. The large oil-lamp gave off great gusts of heat, and the quiet was so absolute that you would have sworn that before Maigret arrived the two of them had spent hours neither speaking nor moving. The door to the second cabin was bolted shut. Was Aline asleep? Was she inside, very still, listening in the dark?

‘Is the cab driver still there?’

Like a man half asleep, Ducrau struggled to throw off his torpor.

‘Do you like Dutch gin?’

It was he who went and got a glass from the sideboard, which he filled with a colourless liquid, and then reached out for his own glass. At that moment Gassin, with a crude swipe of his hand, brushed everything off the table. Bottle and glasses rolled across the floor. By some miracle, the bottle did not break but it lost its cork and went on gurgling for some time.

Ducrau had not batted an eyelid. Perhaps he’d been expecting something of the sort? But Gassin, only moments away from an eruption of fury, was breathing heavily, fists bunched and his upper body arched forward.

Someone stirred in the other cabin. The taxi-driver was still walking up and down outside on the quayside.

Gassin remained as he was for a moment as if suspended in time, then slumped back on to his chair, his head in his hands, sobbing.

‘Hell’s teeth!’

Ducrau motioned Maigret towards the hatch and, as he passed the old man, he merely touched him on the shoulder. It was over. Out on deck, they drank in the fresh air, relishing its coolness. The taxi-driver ran back to his cab. Ducrau paused a moment, one hand on the arm of his companion.

‘I’ve done what I could. Are you going back to Paris?’

They climbed back up the stone steps to where the car’s engine was running with its rear door open. Through the window of the bar, Maigret saw the figure of Fernand, who must have been keeping an eye on the car.

‘Was it you who gave the order that you were not to be disturbed?’

‘Who to?’

Maigret gestured with one hand, and his companion understood.

‘Did he do that?’

Ducrau smiled, both flattered and irritated.

'They're good men but not very bright!' he growled. 'Get in. Straight ahead, driver. Town centre.'

He took his cap off and ran his hand through his hair.

'Were you looking for me?'

Maigret had no answer to this. In any case, one was not expected.

'Have you thought any more about the proposal I made this morning?'

But Ducrau had no high hopes. Perhaps he might even have been disappointed by a positive response.

'My wife left this evening to arrange the furniture in the new house.'

'Where is it?'

'Between Meung and Tours.'

The quays were deserted. By the time they reached Rue Saint-Antoine, they had passed only two cars. The driver lowered the glass between them.

'Which way?'

Ducrau replied as if he were rising to a challenge.

'You can drop me at the Maxim.'

And that was where he got out, ponderous and determined in his large blue suit with the black band on one sleeve. The hotel commissionaire probably knew him but sprang into action all the same.

'Coming in for a moment, inspector?'

'No thanks.'

Ducrau was already halfway through the revolving door, so they did not shake hands or even have time to nod a goodnight.

It was 1.30 a.m. The commissionaire asked Maigret:

'Taxi?'

'Yes ... no ...'

There was no one in the flat on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and the double bed had been dispatched to the country. Maigret followed Ducrau's example: he found a hotel room at the far end of Rue Saint-Honoré.

His wife, who had arrived safely, was sleeping in their new house for the first time.



7.

The slow, steady sound of shuffling feet could still be heard coming from the far end of the cemetery even though the front of the funeral procession was already back at the main gate. The crunch of gravel, the dust which clouded the air and hatched little bursts of iridescence, the ponderous progress of this moving herd which was forced at intervals to stop and mark time, all combined to heighten further the effects of the heat.

With his back against the open gate of the cemetery, Émile Ducrau, dressed entirely in black with a very white shirt, was wiping his forehead with his balled-up handkerchief, shaking the hand of all those who paid their respects as they left. No one could have said for sure what he was thinking. He had shed no tears and more, he had not stopped looking at people as if he had nothing at all to do with this funeral. His son-in-law, spare and smartly turned out, had red eyes. The faces of the women were not visible under their mourning veils.

The procession had choked the streets of Charenton. Behind the two carriages full of flowers and wreaths had walked hundreds of men from the canal boats, all scrubbed and well turned out, wearing blue and holding their caps in their hands.

They gave little bows, one by one, as they left the cemetery murmuring their condolences, after which they formed embarrassed groups and then went off in search of a bar. Pearls of sweat stood out on their foreheads. Their skin was patently clammy inside their double-breasted jackets.

Maigret was on the pavement opposite standing next to the flower stall and wondering if he was going to stay any longer. A taxi pulled up nearby. One of his inspectors got out and looked round for him.

‘Over here, Lucas!’

‘Has anything happened? I’ve just learned that at half past eight this morning old Gassin bought a revolver from a gunsmith’s near the Bastille.’

Gassin was there, still fifty metres from the family, who were standing in a line. He was moving with the crowd, not speaking to those next to him, dull-eyed and showing no sign of impatience.

Maigret had already noticed him because it was the first time he had seen him in his Sunday best, beard trimmed, wearing a new shirt and suit. Had he finally abandoned his drinking bout? But in any case he was more dignified and much calmer. He no longer kept muttering words under his breath, and it was actually somewhat disconcerting to see him looking so distinguished.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Certain. He got them to show him how to use it.’

‘A little later, when he’s a bit further away from here, I want you to arrest him and bring him to me at the station.’

Meanwhile, Maigret crossed the road quickly and took up a position not three metres from Ducrau, who looked up in surprise. People were still filing past, all of them wearing blue, their faces red and their hair damp. Maigret’s eye caught Gassin’s as he came closer, but the old man showed neither surprise nor exasperation.

He took his turn. He marked time behind the others. Eventually he held out his old, gnarled hand and shook that of his employer.

That was all. Then he left. Maigret watched the way he walked but could not say whether or not he had been drinking, for too much drink can sometimes make a man seem too composed.

Lucas was waiting at the first street corner. Maigret gave him the nod, and the two men walked away, one behind the other.

‘Remember to call in at the shop in Rue du Sentier, opposite the post-office, and buy a hundred metres of curtain cord,’ Madame Maigret had said over the phone that morning.

In Charenton, men from the barges were everywhere, and soon there would be men from the barges wearing their best clothes in all the bars along the quays, from the canal all the way to Auteuil. How had old Gassin reacted when Lucas

had arrested him? Maigret had decided to go off in the opposite direction and now he did not know which street he was in. Someone called his name.

‘Inspector!’

It was Ducrau, who was already almost up with him. He must have abandoned his mourning family and cut short the condolences to catch him up.

‘What are you lot up to with Gassin?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was watching you back there when your inspector was talking to you. Is he going to be arrested?’

‘He has been.’

‘Why?’

Maigret wondered for a moment whether he should say anything or not.

‘He bought himself a revolver this morning.’

Ducrau said nothing, but his eyes became very small and hard.

‘I assume he did so with you in mind?’ Maigret went on.

‘It’s quite likely,’ muttered Ducrau thrusting one hand in his pocket from which he produced a Browning.

He gave a defiant laugh.

‘Are you going to arrest me?’

‘Hardly worth the bother. We’d have to let you go in next to no time.’

‘How about Gassin?’

‘Gassin as well.’

They were standing in a patch of sunlight on the kerb, in a narrow street where housewives were doing their shopping. It was there, as he thought about having two men each with a revolver on the loose in Paris, that the crazy idea came to Maigret that he must look as if he was playing God the Father.

‘Gassin won’t kill me,’ said Ducrau.

‘Why not?’

‘Because!’

And changing tack:

‘Will you have lunch with me tomorrow, out in the country? At Samois?’

‘I’ll see. Thanks anyway.’

He let him walk away, with his revolver and his detachable collar, which was too tight and was hurting him. Maigret felt tired. He remembered that he had

promised to phone his wife and let her know if he was coming down on Sunday to spend the day with her. But first he went into the police station. At least it was cool inside! The station head had gone to lunch, and his office clerk greeted Maigret enthusiastically.

‘Your man is in the cell on the left. I’ve got the contents of his pockets here.’

They were laid out on a sheet of newspaper: first the revolver, which was a cheap affair, with a cylinder; then a meerschaum pipe, a red rubber tobacco pouch and a handkerchief edged with blue; and finally a limp, rusty-brown wallet which Maigret juggled in his hand for a moment before opening it.

There was hardly anything in it. In one compartment were the *Golden Fleece*’s registration documents, and the clearance certificate with the signatures of the lock-keepers. In addition there was a small amount of money and two photographs, one of a woman and the other of a man.

The photo of the woman was at least twenty years old. The picture, badly printed, had faded but it was still possible to make out the features of a young, slim woman with a tentative smile not unlike Aline’s.

It was Gassin’s wife and, given her delicate health and natural languor, she must have seemed refined, ladylike to the rugged denizens of the canal – including Ducrau, who had slept with her! Did it happen on board the boat when Gassin was out drinking in a bar or in some shabby hotel room?

The other photograph was of Jean Ducrau, whom they had just buried. It was a casual snap. The young man was wearing white trousers and standing on the deck of the barge. On the back, he had written: *To my sweet Aline who might perhaps read these words one day, Jean.*

He was dead too! Hanged!

‘Here you go,’ said Maigret.

‘Did you find anything?’

‘Just dead people,’ he murmured as he opened a cell door.

‘Well now, Gassin.’

The old man was sitting on a bench. He stood up, and Maigret scowled when he saw his gaping shoes, his collar undone and his tie gone. He called the clerk:

‘Who was responsible for this?’

‘It’s routine ...’

‘Lace his shoes and knot his tie for him.’

For the boatman was in such a pitiful state that the whole process felt like an insult or plain malice.

‘Sit down, Gassin. Here are your possessions, except for the revolver, of course. Is the drinking binge over? Is your head clear?’

He sat down opposite him, elbows on knees, while the old man, bending down, was threading his shoe-laces.

‘Let’s be clear. I’ve never bothered you. I’ve let you come and go as you pleased and drink like a hole in sand. Oh stop fiddling with that now! You can get dressed later. Are you listening?’

Gassin looked up, and Maigret realized that if he’d kept his head down earlier it was probably to hide an odd sort of smile.

‘Why do you want to kill Ducrau?’

The smile had already vanished. Instead, there was the deeply lined face of a boatman which, now that it was turned towards Maigret, wore an expression of total composure.

‘I’ve not killed anybody yet.’

Wasn’t this the first time he’d spoken? He said the words calmly, in a muted growl which was probably his natural voice.

‘I know. But do you intend to kill anybody?’

‘I might kill somebody.’

‘Ducrau?’

‘Maybe him, maybe someone else.’

He wasn’t drunk, that much was obvious. But he had been drinking. Either that or there was something left over from previous libations. On those other days, he exaggerated his exasperated reactions. Now he was too calm.

‘Why did you buy a gun?’

‘What are you doing in Charenton?’

‘I don’t see the connection.’

‘But there is one!’

And as Maigret fell momentarily silent, disconcerted by this bewilderingly reductive turn of the conversation, he added:

‘Except that it really has nothing to do with you.’

He picked up the second lace, bent over and once more began feeding it through the eyeholes of his shoe. Maigret had to listen very hard so as not to miss a word of what he was saying because words tended to get lost in his beard. Perhaps he didn't care whether he was heard or not. Perhaps it was one last rambling of a drunk.

'Ten years ago, at Châlons, the master of the *Cormorant* moored his boat just by a grand house where a doctor lived. His name was Louis – not the doctor, the boatman. He was over the moon, he could hardly wait: his wife, who was thirty, was at last expecting.'

At intervals the walls shook as a tram went past, and the bell of a shop nearby was just audible as the door kept constantly opening and closing.

'A baby! They'd been hoping for one for eight years. To have one, Louis would have spent every penny he'd saved. So he goes and talks to the doctor, a short dark man with glasses. I used to know him. Louis explains that he's afraid the birth will happen out in the sticks, in some village or other, and that he'd rather stay at Châlons for as long as it took.'

Gassin sat up, blowing hard, the result of remaining bent over.

'A week goes by. The doctor calls every evening. Eventually, one day at about five in the afternoon, the contractions start coming. Louis can't sit still. He goes out on deck, on to the quay. He hangs on the doctor's doorbell. He wills him to come. The doctor assures him that all is well, very well, that everything is going without a hitch and that all he needs do is to send for him at the last moment.'

Gassin was speaking as if he were reciting a litany.

'You don't know that part of the town? I can see the house as clearly as if I was there, a large, brand-new detached house, with big windows which were all lit up that evening, for the doctor was giving a party. He was prinked and perfumed, and his moustaches freshly curled. Twice he comes in a great hurry, his breath smelling the first time of burgundy and then of spirits.

"Good! Excellent!" he kept saying. "I'll be back shortly ..."

'Louis ran across the quay. There were sounds of a gramophone playing. On the curtains there were shadows of people dancing.

'His wife was screaming, and Louis, like one demented, was weeping dry tears. What was happening terrified him. An old woman whose boat was moored a little way away was convinced that the child was presenting badly.

‘At midnight, Louis goes and rings the doctor’s doorbell. He is told the doctor will come soon.

‘At half past midnight, he rings again. The corridor is full of music.

‘And Louis’ wife is screaming so loudly that passers-by stop for a moment on the quay and then go hurrying on their way.

‘Finally the guests leave. The little doctor appears, not entirely drunk, but not exactly clear-headed. He removes his jacket and rolls up his sleeves.

“‘Might need forceps ...”

‘There’s not much room to move. They keep getting in each other’s way. And then the doctor starts talking about crushing the child’s head.

“‘But you can’t do that!” cries Louis.

“‘Do you want me to save the mother?”

‘The doctor is almost asleep. He’s almost out on his feet. He’s floundering. An hour later, he straightens up. Louis sees that his wife has stopped screaming, is no longer moving ...’

Gassin stared Maigret straight in the eye and finished:

‘Louis killed him.’

‘Killed the doctor?’

‘Coolly, no fuss, put a bullet in his head, then he fired another into his gut, then he opened his own mouth as if he intended eating the barrel, and there was a third shot. They sold the barge at auction three months later.’

Why was Gassin smiling? Maigret preferred him dead drunk and venomous, as he had been on previous days.

‘What are you going to do with me now,’ he asked, without curiosity.

‘Will you promise not to do anything stupid?’

‘What do you mean by stupid?’

‘Ducrau has always been your friend, hasn’t he?’

‘We come from the same village. We’ve shipped together.’

‘He’s ... very fond of you.’

Maigret stumbled over the words.

‘Maybe.’

‘Tell me, Gassin, who have you got it in for? I’m talking man to man now.’

‘And you?’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘I’m asking who you’ve got it in for. You’re looking for something. Well? Have you found it?’

It was unexpected. Where Maigret had seen only an old soak, there was a man who might drink himself silly in his little corner but had in fact been carrying out an investigation of his own. So that was what Gassin meant!

‘I haven’t come up with anything definite yet.’

‘Nor me.’

But he was on the point of doing so! That was the meaning of the heavy, cold look in his eye.

Maigret had been right to give him back his laces and tie. This whole business no longer had any connection with this scruffy cell nor even with the police. They were two men sitting opposite each other.

‘You had nothing to do with the attack on Ducrau, did you?’

‘Absolutely nothing,’ came the sardonic reply.

‘Nor did you have anything to do with the suicide of Jean Ducrau?’

Gassin did not answer but shook his head slowly.

‘You weren’t related to Bébert and you weren’t a friend of his. You had no reason to hang him.’

The boatman stood up with a sigh, and Maigret was shocked to see him so small, so old.

‘Tell me what you know, Gassin. Your Châlons friend left nothing behind him. But you have a daughter.’

He regretted the words for he was given a look of such desperate questing that he felt he had no choice but to lie, and lie well, whatever the consequences.

‘Your daughter will get better.’

‘Maybe she will and maybe she won’t.’

It was as if it didn’t matter to him either way. Dammit, that wasn’t the issue, and Maigret knew it. They had reached the point where he wished he hadn’t come. But Gassin asked nothing. He remained silent and watched, that was all, and it was painful.

‘You’ve been happy on the barge until now ...’

‘Do you know why I always do the same run? Because it’s the one we did after I got married.’

His face looked leathery, and the skin was criss-crossed with fine black lines.

‘Answer me, Gassin: do you know who attacked Ducrau?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Do you have any idea why his son said he did it?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Do you know why the lock-keeper was hanged?’

‘No.’

He was telling the truth, that much was beyond doubt.

‘Will I be sent to prison?’

‘I can’t keep you under arrest much longer for carrying a prohibited firearm.

All I ask is that you should stay calm and patient and wait until my investigations are complete.’

The small, light-coloured eyes had turned aggressive again.

‘I’m not the doctor from Châlons,’ added Maigret.

Gassin smiled as the inspector got to his feet, exhausted by this encounter which was supposed to be an interrogation.

‘I’m going to let you go now.’

It was the only thing he could do. Outside, it was still the same implausible spring weather – not a drop of rain, never a shower and a cloudless sky. The ground under the chestnut trees in the small square was hard and white. All day, council watering carts kept sprinkling the tarmac, which was now as soft as at the height of summer.

On the Seine, the Marne and even on the canal itself small boats, some painted, others newly varnished, rowed by men with their shirt-sleeves rolled up, threaded their way through the barges.

There were pavement cafés everywhere, and to stroll past one of them was to walk through a smell of cold beer. Many boatmen had not yet rejoined their boats; they were rolling from one bar to another, in their starched collars, their faces growing redder and redder.

An hour later, Maigret learned in the bar on the quay that Gassin hadn’t gone back to his barge but that he’d taken a room at Catherine’s, above the dance hall.



8.

It was a Sunday, one of those Sundays which do not exist outside childhood memories, everything spruce and newly minted, from the periwinkle-blue sky to the water which reflected elongated images of the houses. Even the taxis were redder or greener than on other days, and the empty, echoing streets playfully bounced the smallest sounds back and forth.

Maigret ordered the driver to stop just before he got to the Charenton lock, and Lucas, whom he'd detailed to keep an eye on Gassin, emerged from the bar and came over to meet him.

'He hasn't moved. He spent last night drinking with the woman who runs the dance hall, but he hasn't left the place. Maybe he's still asleep.'

The decks of the barges were as deserted as the streets. There was just one small boy sitting on a rudder, who was putting on his Sunday socks. Lucas, nodding towards the *Golden Fleece*, went on:

'Yesterday, the crazy girl got worked up. She popped out of the hatch five or six times and once she ran as far as the bar on the corner. Some boatmen saw her and went off to find the old man, but he wouldn't go home. After the funeral and the rest of it, it created an awkward atmosphere. Until midnight you could see people on the boats all the time, and they were all looking in this direction. I should also mention that the dance hall has opened again for business. You can hear the music as far away as the lock. The men from the boats were still all dressed up. Anyway, the girl must have gone to sleep in the end, but this morning it wasn't properly light before she was wandering around the place, not wearing shoes, like a cat worrying about her kittens. On the way she woke up the

neighbours on three or four barges: two hours ago you'd have seen men and women in nightshirts peering out of all the hatches. But despite it all, no one told her where the old man was. I think it was for the best. One woman brought her back to the *Golden Fleece*, and they're both there now, cooking up breakfast for themselves. Look, you can see the smoke coming from the stove-pipe.'

Smoke was rising straight into the air from most of the boats, where people were getting dressed amid a warm aroma of coffee.

'Keep watching him,' said Maigret.

Instead of getting back into his taxi, he walked into the dance hall. The door was open. The woman was sprinkling water on the floor before sweeping it.

'Is he upstairs?' asked the inspector.

'I think he's just got up. I can hear footsteps.'

Maigret climbed several stairs and listened. Someone was indeed moving about. Then a door opened, and Gassin stuck out his face covered with shaving soap, shrugged his shoulders and went back inside.

Ducrau's house in the country, at Samois, was separated from the Seine by the towpath. It was a substantial building consisting of three wings and a central courtyard.

When the taxi stopped, Ducrau was waiting by the gate. He was wearing navy blue as usual, and there was a new cap on his head.

'You needn't keep the cab,' he told Maigret. 'My car will take you back.'

He waited while Maigret paid the driver. He applied surprisingly meticulous attention to locking the gate himself. He then put the key in his pocket and called to his chauffeur, who was at the far end of the courtyard cleaning a grey car with a hose.

'Edgar! Don't let anybody in and if you see anyone prowling round the house, come and tell me.'

After which he looked solemnly at Maigret and asked:

'Where is he?'

'Getting dressed.'

'What about Aline? What sort of state is she in?'

'She went out looking for him. But now she's on the barge, and a neighbour is with her.'

‘Fancy a bite to eat? We won’t be having lunch before one.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Maybe a glass of something?’

‘Not just now.’

Ducrau stayed in the courtyard, looking at the buildings and pointed to a window with the end of his walking stick.

‘The old girl isn’t dressed yet. As for the young couple, you can hear them bickering.’

Indeed raised voices could be heard through the open windows of a room on the first floor.

‘The vegetable garden is at the back, as are the original stables. The house on the left belongs to a big publisher, and some English people live in the one on the right.’

There were country houses and villas in the area round about, between the Seine and the forest of Fontainebleau. Maigret made out the dull thud of balls coming from a nearby tennis court. The gardens were contiguous. An old lady in white was sitting in a rocking-chair by the side of a lawn.

‘Sure you won’t have a drink?’

Ducrau seemed disconcerted, as if he was asking himself what on earth he was going to do with his visitor. He hadn’t shaved. His eyelids drooped wearily.

‘Well, this is where we spend Sundays.’

The tone of voice was the same as if he had sighed:

‘Do you have any idea of how awful life can be?’

Around the two men all was calm, with contrasts of light and shade, white walls, climbing roses and a shingle of gravel underfoot. The Seine flowed gently by, its surface furrowed by small boats. People on horses rode past on the towpath.

Ducrau made his way to the vegetable garden, filling his pipe as he walked, pointed out a peacock which was floundering through a bed of lettuce and growled:

‘My daughter’s idea. She thinks it adds a touch of class. She wanted swans too, but there’s no lake!’

He was giving so little thought to what he was saying that suddenly, looking Maigret straight in the eye, he said very distinctly:

‘I don’t suppose you’ve changed your mind?’

It wasn’t a question he was asking lightly. He’d had it ready for some time, probably since the evening before, and it was all he had been thinking about. He attached such importance to it that it hung over him like a brooding cloud.

Maigret was smoking and watched the smoke rising in the clear air.

‘I’m leaving the force on Wednesday.’

‘I know.’

They understood each other perfectly, though neither wanted to let it be known. Ducrau had not shut and locked the gate casually, and there was nothing casual now about the way he walked round the deserted vegetable garden.

‘Isn’t this enough for you?’ asked Maigret so quietly and with such unconcern that anyone would have wondered if in fact he’d spoken at all.

Ducrau halted and spent ages staring at a melon cloche. When he looked up again, his expression was quite different. Before, he hadn’t been wearing a mask: he’d been a man who was worried, hesitant, anxious.

But that was all changed. His features had hardened. An unpleasant smile lurked around his mouth. He did not look at his visitor but all around him, at the sky, at the windows of the large white house.

‘He’ll see me, won’t he?’

And his roaming eyes finally hit Maigret full in the face. It was the gaze of a man forcing himself to look on the bright side but, as his confidence ebbs, tries to look threatening.

‘Let’s talk about something else. What if we had that drink after all? Know what surprises me? The fact that your inquiries have not included Decharme and my mistress, and ...’

‘I thought you wanted to change the subject?’

But a genial Ducrau laid a hand on Maigret’s shoulder and carried on:

‘Hold on! Let’s play this straight. You start by telling me who you think is guilty.’

‘Guilty of what?’

They were both smiling. From a distance, it would have appeared that they must be talking about something quite insignificant.

‘Of everything.’

‘What if there are different persons who are guilty of different things?’

Ducrau frowned: he did not like the answer. He opened a door, the door to the kitchen, where his wife, still in her dressing gown, was giving instructions to a maid. She was very put out to have been caught with her hair undone and, holding on to her chignon with one hand, stammered her excuses while her husband growled:

‘That’ll do! The inspector doesn’t give a damn about that! Mélie, I want you to go down to the cellar and bring us up a bottle of ... what shall it be? ... champagne? No? In that case we’ll make do with the aperitifs in the drawing room.’

He slammed the door behind them and when they reached the drawing room he rummaged among bottles which cluttered a window-sill.

‘Pernod? Gentian? Did you see? And her daughter is even worse! If she wasn’t in mourning, she’d come down later in a pink or green silk dress, with her very best smile and sugary manners.’

He filled two glasses and pushed a chair towards the inspector.

‘It doesn’t bother me if the neighbours look down on us, especially when, as we shall soon be doing, we eat outside, on the terrace!’

His glance wandered slowly from one object to another. The drawing room was expensively done out, and there was an enormous grand piano.

‘Good health! When I was buying my first tug, I had of course to pay for it by instalments. I had twelve drafts, which the bank was willing to accept provided I could find a guarantor. I asked my father-in-law to back me. Know what? He refused, saying he didn’t have the right to reduce his family to beggary! And now I’m the one responsible for keeping the old woman.’

It seemed that his bitterness was so deeply rooted in him that it made him ill even to talk about it. He looked round for something else to talk about. He reached for a box of cigars.

‘Want one? If you’d prefer to stick to the pipe, feel free.’

As he spoke, he crumpled up the embroidered napkin which lay on the table.

‘That’s how they spend their time! And then there’s the officer who solves those prize chess problems you find on the back pages of newspapers!’

He was thinking about something else, and Maigret, who was beginning to get to know him, just smiled now when Ducrau’s eyes were at variance with what he said.

What about those eyes? They were constantly on Maigret. They never stopped trying to size him up. They kept wondering all the time if their first impression was right and especially what his weak spot might be.

‘What did you do about your mistress?’

‘I told her to make herself scarce and I don’t even know where she went. On the other hand, she turned up for the funeral tastefully rigged out in full mourning with her face made up like some ageing tart!’

His frustration was obvious. Everything rubbed him up the wrong way. It was as if he’d got to the point where he even hated inanimate objects like the napkin which he was still torturing with his fingers.

‘In the Maxim, she was delightful, full of fun. She embodied something, you know, something different from my wife and women like her! I set her up in her own apartment and what happened? She ran to fat, took to washing her own clothes and cooked like a concierge ...’

Maigret had long since understood how Ducrau’s tragicomic situation had poisoned his existence. He had started with nothing. He now earned money hand over fist, he did deals with powerful men of business and had glimpses of their way of life. Meanwhile his family had held him back. At Samois, Madame Ducrau was still doing the same things and behaving in the same way as when she used to do the washing in the stern of the tug and his daughter was a caricature of a lower middle-class, shopkeeper’s wife.

Ducrau felt it like a personal affront and he was absolutely convinced that the neighbours didn’t take him seriously despite the huge white mansion, the chauffeur and the gardener.

He would watch them on their lawns and on their terraces and envy them. He was filled with rage and, by way of protest, spat on the floor, kept his hands in his pockets and swore loudly.

There were footsteps on the stairs. He sighed and said with a wink:

‘Here come the others!’

It was his daughter and son-in-law, in black, formally dressed and well turned out. They advanced with their heads bowed, exuding the pained self-effacement of those who have been visited by grievous misfortune.

‘Delighted to meet you, inspector. Father has often spoken of you and ...’

‘That’s enough of that! Have something to drink instead!’

His irritation grew stronger in their presence. From the window, he kept his eyes on the gate, which stood out against the Seine behind it.

‘You must excuse us, inspector.’

The son-in-law was blond, formal in manner and resigned.

‘A small glass of port?’ he asked his wife.

‘What did you have, inspector?’

At the window, Ducrau drummed his fingers with impatience. Maybe he was searching for something wounding to say? But at all events, he turned suddenly and growled:

‘The inspector was asking me for information about you. And since he knows that you have debts, he pointed out to me that my death would have solved your problem. And Jean’s death would have doubled your expectations.’

‘Oh, Father!’ cried his daughter, dabbing her eyes with a black-edged handkerchief.

“‘Oh, Father!’” he mimicked. ‘Well? Am I the one with debts? Is it me who wants to go off and live in the Midi?’

The couple were used to it, and Decharme was very well practised: he merely smiled a faint, sad smile, a smile which was hardly there, as if he thought that such comments were a joke or the effect of a passing mood of ill-humour. He had dainty hands, pale and long, which he played with as he fiddled with his platinum wedding-ring.

‘Did I mention that they’re expecting a child?’

Berthe Decharme hid her face in her hands. It was embarrassing. Ducrau knew it, but he was doing it on purpose. The chauffeur walked across the courtyard and was heading towards the steps leading up to the front door. Ducrau opened the window and called to him:

‘What is it?’

‘You told me, sir, to ...’

‘Yes, yes! Out with it!’

Disconcerted, the chauffeur pointed to the nondescript figure of a man sitting on the grass outside the gate who was at that moment taking a hunk of bread out of his pocket.

‘Cretin!’

He shut the window. Outside, the maid, who had put on a white apron, was laying the table on the terrace, which was shaded by a red umbrella.

‘I don’t suppose you even know what we’ll be eating?’

His daughter took advantage of the moment to leave the room while Decharme pretended to leaf through a pile of piano scores.

‘Do you play?’ asked Maigret.

It was Ducrau who answered him:

‘Him? Not a note! No one in this house can play! The piano is just for show, like the rest of the stuff!’

And though it was rather cold in the room, his forehead was covered in sweat.

The neighbours on the left were still playing tennis and a liveried servant was bringing out refreshments when the Ducraus were having lunch on their terrace. The umbrella was not keeping off enough of the sun, and damp semi-circles were showing under the arms of Berthe’s black silk dress. Ducrau was so tense that it was draining to see. Everything he said, everything he did was excruciating.

When the fish was brought to the table, he asked to see the dish. He sniffed it, poked it with the end of his forefinger and barked:

‘Take it away!’

‘But Émile!’

‘Take it away!’ he repeated.

When his wife returned from the kitchen, her eyes were red. He, on the other hand, turned to Maigret and said doggedly:

‘So you’re retiring on Wednesday. Is that Wednesday morning or Wednesday evening?’

‘Wednesday midnight.’

He turned to his son-in-law, going on the attack:

‘Know how much I offered him to work for me? A hundred and fifty thousand. If he holds out for two hundred, he’ll get it!’

He was still keeping an eye on the comings and goings outside the gate. He was afraid. And Maigret, the only one there who knew, was even more uncomfortable than the others, for the spectacle of this man fighting off panic was tragic but also rather ridiculous and contemptible.

Over coffee, Ducrau came up with something else.

‘Now this,’ he said, waving one hand at the group sitting round the table, ‘is what is called a family. First, there’s a man who carries the full weight on his shoulders, who always has and will go on bearing the burden until the day he dies. Then there’s the rest, with their hooks in him, hangers-on, all of them.’

‘You’re not going to start again,’ said his daughter, rising.

‘You’re right. Why don’t you go for a little walk. This could be your last peaceful Sunday.’

She gave a start. Her husband, who was wiping his mouth with his serviette, looked up. Madame Ducrau, on the other hand, had not perhaps heard.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing! I don’t mean anything! Just you carry on making your preparations for your trip to the Midi.’

The son-in-law, who clearly had no sense of timing, remarked quietly:

‘Berthe and I have been thinking. The Midi is rather far away. If we could find something on the banks of the Loire ...’

‘Very good! All you have to do is ask the inspector to winkle out a house near his and he’ll do it like a shot, just for the pleasure of having the pair of you as neighbours!’

‘Do you live by the Loire?’ asked Decharme eagerly.

‘He’s going to live there. Perhaps.’

Slowly, Maigret turned towards him and he wasn’t smiling now. He had just been kicked in the chest by a sensation which made his lips tremble. For days he had been floundering in a state of sickening uncertainty and now everything had become clear by the magic of one small word:

‘Perhaps!’

Ducrau returned his look with the same gravity, the same awareness of the significance of the moment.

‘Where is your property?’

But the son-in-law’s voice was just a buzzing noise to which neither of them paid the slightest attention. Louder was the breathing of Ducrau, whose nostrils flared, and the light of battle lit his gleaming face.

They had circled round each other for long enough. They had got each other’s measure but hadn’t struck a blow.

Maigret was also breathing more easily. He filled his pipe, and there was sensual pleasure in the way his fingers burrowed into his tobacco pouch.

‘Personally, I wouldn’t mind the area around Cosnes or Gien ...’

Balls were hit back and forth on the red clay court by girls in fluttering tennis whites. A small motor-boat made inroads into the current of the Seine, purring like a contented tomcat.

Madame Ducrau rang a bell to summon the maid, but none of it mattered now to the two men who had finally made contact.

‘Why don’t you go to your wife, who is probably in her room crying her eyes out?’

‘You think so? Personally, I reckon it’s her condition that makes her on edge.’

‘That’s it, go, you moron!’ laughed Ducrau as his son-in-law left the room, still apologizing. ‘And what do you think you’re doing, wagging your little bell?’

‘Rosalie forgot to bring the liqueurs.’

‘Don’t bother. When we want liqueurs we’ll serve ourselves, isn’t that right, Maigret?’

He hadn’t said ‘inspector’. He had said Maigret. Ducrau wiped his lips with his serviette and stuck out his chest as he surveyed the countryside. He was filling his lungs and he too was purring contentedly.

‘What do you make of it?’

‘Make of what?’

‘Everything! All this! The weather’s good! Look, even the lock-keeper is eating outside with his family! When I was on horse-drawn boats, right at the beginning, I used to have a bite of something with Gassin on the canal embankment. Since horses are supposed to be rested for a couple of hours, we used to snooze flat out on the grass with grasshoppers jumping over our heads.’

It was as if each of his pupils had divided into two. There was one look which was hazy and lingered blithely over the landscape. Then there, right in the centre, sharp, focused, grim, was another kind of look, which was quite independent of the first.

‘Fancy a short walk to help lunch go down?’

He made for the gate and opened it. But before going out on to the towpath, he reached his hand into his back pocket, took out his Browning with a flourish and

checked the magazine.

It was theatrical, puerile, but still it was impressive. Maigret did not blench and made no sign that he had noticed anything. Voices floated down from the room upstairs, one of them raised in anger.

‘What did I tell you? They’re arguing.’

With his revolver back in his pocket, he walked alongside Maigret, at a leisurely pace, chest out, like a Sunday stroller. When they reached the lock he stopped briefly to look at the water spurting through the numerous leaks in the gate and at the family sitting around a table by their front door.

‘What’s the date?’

‘Thirteenth of April.’

He gave Maigret a suspicious look.

‘The thirteenth? Right!’

And they resumed their walk.



9.

It was that time of day when the colours are deeper but less vibrant, for things retreat into themselves as they wait for the approaching dusk. The eye could now stare directly into the red sun, which hung over the wooded hills. The reflections in the water were more generous, gorgeous, yet were tinged with something cold and dead.

Just above the lock, strollers were watching a young man trying to start the engine of a motor-boat. They heard it turn over once or twice, suck in air and splutter, and then the exasperated growl of the crank-handle was repeated.

It was Ducrau, hands behind his back, who stopped all of a sudden as he surveyed a row of buildings which lined the riverbank at this spot. Maigret had not noticed anything unusual.

‘Look, inspector.’

The buildings were restaurants and rather expensive houses, and there was a long line of cars parked at the kerb. But between two restaurants there was a narrow bar which doubtless served meals for the cars’ chauffeurs and outside which, it being Sunday, three or four tables had been set up to constitute a terrace.

Maigret stared, trying to see what he was supposed to be looking at. The passers-by cast enormously long, spindly shadows. Already a few boaters and many light dresses were in evidence. Eventually, Maigret’s eye was caught by a familiar figure, that of Lucas, who was sitting on the small terrace with a glass of beer before him. Lucas had also seen Maigret and smiled at him from across the road. He seemed perfectly happy to be there, on a fine Sunday, under the red and

yellow striped awning which gave him shade, where he sat next to a laurel in a container.

To his right, at the other end of the terrace, Maigret had already spotted old Gassin, who, elbows on a round table, which was too small, was busy writing a letter.

People were coming back from some gala or other for they were walking almost in a procession and raising clouds of dust. No one noticed that two men in the crowd had stopped or heard one of them ask as he put his hand in his pocket:

‘Could this be called self-defence?’

Ducrau was not joking. He could not take his eyes off the old man, who occasionally looked up to think about what he was going to write next but appeared oblivious to his surroundings.

Maigret did not answer. He merely signalled to Lucas and started walking towards the lock while Ducrau followed him reluctantly.

‘Did you hear what I asked?’

The motor-boat was finally under way, gliding over the water, leaving a wake of eddying arabesques.

‘Here I am, sir.’

It was Lucas who stared down at the water just as the others were doing.

‘Is he armed?’

‘No. I searched his room. There was no revolver there. And he didn’t stop off anywhere on his way here.’

‘Has he spotted you?’

‘I don’t think so. He’s too busy with his own thoughts.’

‘Make good and sure you get that letter. Off you go!’

‘You still haven’t answered,’ Ducrau said insistently as they set off again.

‘And you heard: he’s not armed.’

They continued walking, and the white mansion kept getting closer.

‘So in short,’ said Ducrau sarcastically, ‘we’ve both got our own guardian angel. It would be better if you stayed for dinner. And also if you accepted a bed for the night ...’

He opened the gate. His wife, his daughter and his son-in-law were on the terrace, drinking tea. The chauffeur was mending an inner tube which lay on the

gravel of the courtyard like a large, assertively red wreath.

They were ensconced in wicker chairs at a table on which there were bottles and glasses. They had not joined the rest of the family on the terrace. Instead, they had stayed in the courtyard, near the door to the drawing room, which, at their backs, was already being invaded by shadows. The streetlamps of Samoï had been turned on much too early for in this light they were no more than splashes of white, while the Sunday crowd was thinning and being absorbed by the railway station.

‘Do you think,’ said Maigret in his calmest voice, ‘that a man who has killed another man and is worried for his own safety will hesitate for long about killing another man and, if needs be, a third?’

Ducrau was smoking an enormous meerschaum pipe with a long cherry-wood mouthpiece and had to support the bowl in his hand. He stared at his companion, and it was some time before he said quietly:

‘What are you driving at?’

‘Nothing special. I’m thinking that here we are sitting out on a lovely Sunday evening. The cognac is good. Our pipes are drawing well. Meanwhile old Gassin must be on to his aperitifs by now. Come Wednesday evening, all that’s bothering us will have ceased to be a concern. The problem will have been solved.’

He spoke in a dreamy voice while on the terrace above them Decharme struck a match, whose flame danced briefly against the pale sky.

‘So you see, what I’m wondering is, who won’t be around then?’

Ducrau gave a start, which he could not hide. He preferred not to try.

‘You have an ominous way of putting it!’

‘Where were you last Sunday?’

‘Here. We come every Sunday.’

‘And your son?’

Ducrau’s features hardened. He said:

‘He was here too. He spent a couple of hours trying to make the wireless work. It hasn’t been any better since.’

‘And now he’s dead and buried. Bébert is dead. This why I’m thinking about this chair and who’ll be sitting in it next Sunday.’

They could not see each other clearly. The smell of the two pipes spread across the courtyard. Ducrau jumped when someone got off a bicycle just outside the gate and it was from a distance that he called:

‘What do you want?’

‘It’s for Monsieur Maigret.’

It was a local boy, and he poked a letter for the inspector through the bars of the gate.

‘A man gave me this for you near the tobacconist’s.’

‘I know. Thanks.’

Ducrau had not moved. The ladies were going inside because they were getting cold, and it was obvious that Decharme, lingering by the balustrade, was in two minds about whether or not to join the other two men as he would dearly have liked to.

Maigret tore open the first envelope with his name on it and inside found the letter which Gassin had been writing a little earlier. It was addressed to ‘Madame Emma Chatereau, Café des Maraîchers, Larzicourt (Haute-Marne)’.

‘We could put the light on in the drawing room,’ muttered Ducrau, who did not dare to ask any questions.

‘I can still see well enough.’

The paper was the kind supplied in a bar, the ink was purple, the writing was very small to begin with and twice as big by the end:

Dear Emma,

I’m writing to let you know that I am well and I hope that this finds you likewise. But I want to tell you that if anything happens to me I’d like to be buried at home, near our mother, not at Charenton as I said before. So you must not go on paying for that plot there. About the money in the savings bank, you’ll find the pass-books and all the papers in the drawer of the dresser. It’s all for you. You’ll finally be able to have that extra storey built on. As for everything else, no problem, because I know what I have to do.

Your ever loving brother

Maigret, still standing, looked up from the small sheet of paper and scrutinized Ducrau who was pretending to be thinking of something else and went on puffing at his pipe.

‘Bad news?’

‘It’s the letter Gassin was writing earlier.’

Ducrau kept control of himself, crossed then uncrossed his legs, watched his son-in-law from a distance and finally, making every effort not to betray his impatience, said:

‘May I read it?’

‘No.’

Maigret folded the letter then slipped it into his wallet. Without particularly wanting to, he caught himself several times glancing at the gate, behind which there was only a gulf of blackness.

‘Who is it addressed to?’

‘His sister.’

‘Emma? Whatever became of her? She lived on her brother’s boat for a while, and I think I must have been in love with her once. But she married a schoolteacher in the Haute-Marne, and I believe he died shortly afterwards.’

‘She runs an inn in the village where she lives.’

‘It’s getting really cold, wouldn’t you say? Would you mind if we went in?’

Ducrau switched the light on in the drawing room, shut the door, began closing the shutters, then changed his mind.

‘May I know what Gassin wrote to his sister?’

‘No.’

‘Should I be afraid?’

‘You know the answer to that better than I do.’

Ducrau smiled and wandered round the room, not knowing where to put himself, while Maigret, very much at home, went out into the garden and returned with the bottle of cognac and their glasses.

‘Suppose there are these two men,’ he said, serving himself a drink, ‘one who has already killed and as a result could find himself locked up for the rest of his life, or worse, and the other who never harmed a fly. They circle each other like fighting cocks: which, in your opinion, is the more dangerous?’

The only response was an even more leaden smile.

‘All that’s left now is to find out who hanged Bébert. What do you reckon, Ducrau?’

Maigret was still friendly, but there was a new gravity in every word, every syllable he uttered, as if every one of them was heavy with meaning.

Ducrau had finally opted to settle into an armchair, his short legs straight out and his pipe resting on his chest. His position gave him a triple chin, and his half-closed lids were like shutters over his eyes.

‘Do you know what simple question that sort of thinking finally leads to? It is this: who took advantage of Aline’s simple-mindedness one day and left her expecting a baby?’

This time, his companion leaped to his feet like a shot, his cheeks turning red.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Well, it wasn’t you, of course. It wasn’t Gassin either, because he’s always believed he was her father. It wasn’t your son Jean, who had strong feelings for her and who, as it happens ...’

‘Who did what? What are you getting at?’

‘Nothing bad. I’ve had inquiries made about him. Tell me, Ducrau, after you had your first daughter by your wife, didn’t you get ill?’

The only response was a grunt, and Maigret saw a back turned towards him.

‘It could be the explanation. The fact is that Aline is simple-minded. As for your son, he was a sickly child, highly strung and so sensitive that he was given to having hysterical episodes. According to his friends, who joked about it, he wasn’t much of a man. Hence the emotional but utterly pure friendship between him and Aline.’

‘What are you driving at?’

‘At this: if Bébert was killed it was because he was the one who took advantage of her. The *Golden Fleece* is often tied up at Charenton for weeks on end. Gassin spent every evening in bars. The assistant lock-keeper was a loner and as he prowled round the barges he spotted Aline one evening ...’

‘Shut your mouth!’

Ducrau’s neck flushed deep red, and he hurled his pipe into a corner of the room.

‘Is it true?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Maybe he didn’t even have to use force because she’s not aware of her actions. And nobody knows! Until the day Aline gave birth ... There were three men close to Aline ... Who do you think, Ducrau, that Gassin suspects?’

‘Me!’ came the reply.

As he spoke he gave a start, walked heavily to the door and flung it open, revealing his daughter. He raised his hand. She screamed. But instead of hitting her, he simply slammed the door in her face.

‘What else is there?’

He bore down on Maigret like a lion in an arena.

‘I noticed that Aline was afraid of you, even more than afraid. Gassin must have thought the same thing. So when he caught you prowling around her ...’

‘Oh, yes, and what else is there?’

‘Why couldn’t somebody else have thought the same thing, especially since he knew all about your inability to keep your hands off women?’

‘Who? Out with it!’

‘Your son ...’

‘What about him?’

They heard the sound of footsteps and voices coming from the room above. It was a tearful Berthe telling her mother and her husband about what had happened. Shortly after this, the maid came in, looking scared.

‘What is it?’

‘Madame is asking if you’ll go up.’

He could not bring himself to answer. This was too much! Instead, he poured himself a full glass of cognac, which he drank off in one.

‘You were saying?’

‘I was saying that at least three people believe that you are a deeply unpleasant man. Aline locks herself up in her cabin when she sees you coming and cries when your name is mentioned. Her father keeps his eye on you and is only waiting for tangible proof to take his revenge. Then there’s your son. He puts himself through hell the way only very neurotic people can. Didn’t he say something at one point about becoming a monk?’

‘Six months ago. But who told you?’

‘It doesn’t matter. You crushed him. You stifled him. The only happiness he had in life was during those three months he spent recuperating on the *Golden Fleece*.’

‘Get to the point!’

He mopped his face and poured himself more cognac.

‘That’s all. At least I’ve explained why he committed suicide.’

‘I’d like to know how.’

‘When he learned that you’d been attacked and pushed off the barge into the water in the middle of the night, he had no doubt who’d done it: Aline, who had rebelled, and had perhaps been assaulted ...’

‘Why couldn’t he have talked to me about it?’

‘Did he ever talk to you? Does your daughter talk to you? Since he was not allowed to take up a monastic life and believed himself to be entirely worthless, he wanted at least to make one grand gesture in his life. It’s the sort of dreams adolescents in attic rooms have all the time. Fortunately, they don’t always put them into practice. Your son did. He saved Aline! He took the blame! You might not be able to understand it, but any youngster of a certain age would!’

‘What about you? How did you work it out?’

‘Oh, I’m not the only one. You have to realize that while Gassin was crawling from one bar to the next, drunk to the world and not speaking to anyone, he was struggling with this same problem. Last night, he didn’t sleep on the boat. He left Aline by herself. He took a room overlooking the barge.’

Suddenly Ducrau got to his feet and lifted the curtain, but he could see nothing because of the brightness of the light in the drawing room.

‘Did you hear a noise?’

‘No.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Maigret baldly. ‘When two men are going to fight, people try to separate them. But the law does not allow me to step in when two men are getting ready to kill each other. It only allows me to arrest a murderer.’

Ducrau craned forward.

‘To do that, you need proof!’

‘Meaning?’

‘Nothing! As of midnight on Wednesday, I won’t be in the police any more. You reminded me of that fact earlier on. You wouldn’t happen to have any black tobacco, would you?’

He helped himself from a stone jar which Ducrau pointed out to him and, after filling his pipe, he replenished his pouch. There was a knock at the door. It was Decharme, who came in without waiting for an answer.

‘Sorry to interrupt. My wife has asked me to present her excuses for not coming down to dinner. She’s a little unwell. It’s her “condition” ...’

He made no move to leave, looked round for somewhere to sit and was surprised to see the cognac glasses.

‘Wouldn’t you rather have aperitifs instead?’

By some miracle, Ducrau did not jump down his throat, indeed he didn’t even seem to notice that he was there. He had picked his pipe up off the carpet. It had not shattered. There was only a white scuff-mark on the meerschaum bowl, and he rubbed it with a finger he had wetted with saliva.

‘Is my wife upstairs?’

‘She’s just come down. She’s in the kitchen.’

‘Would you excuse me a moment, inspector ...?’

Ducrau looked as if he were expecting that the inspector would not excuse him. It didn’t happen.

‘He’s an odd character!’ sighed Maigret when the door had closed.

Decharme, who was very uncomfortable in the armchair into which he had folded his long body but did not dare get up out of it, gave a little cough and murmured:

‘He can be strange at times, as you’ve probably noticed. Actually, he has good moments as well as bad ones.’

Maigret, again behaving as if he were at home, closed the curtains but left a small gap through which at intervals he looked out at the courtyard.

‘It takes a lot of patience.’

‘And you have enough!’

‘Take now, for instance. My position is rather delicate. I have a commission, as you know. It’s obvious the Army cannot be dragged into certain matters, certain tragic events which ...’

‘Which ...?’ prompted Maigret who was in no mood to show mercy.

‘I don’t know. I’d like your advice. Like me, you serve the public good. Now your presence here, combined with certain rumours ...’

‘What rumours?’

‘I’m not sure. But let us suppose ... This is very hard for me ... We’re just supposing, right? Suppose that a man in a certain profession is put in a position ... a position ...’

‘Would you like a cognac?’

‘No thanks. I never drink spirits.’

Despite the interruption, he stuck to his guns. He had made up his mind to see this through and was not making it up as he went along. He had his little speech all ready.

‘When an officer has failed in his duty, it is traditional that it falls to his comrades to let him know where his honour lies and they leave him alone with a revolver. It avoids scandalous public comment ...’

‘Who do you have in mind?’

‘No one in particular. But I cannot help but be worried. I came to ask you once and for all either to reassure me or to say if we must expect to ...’

But he had no intention of being any more explicit. He rose to his feet, feeling relieved. He smiled as he waited for the reply.

‘Are you asking me if your father-in-law is a murderer and if I’m going to arrest him?’

He had given no hint that he had been concerned for one moment by the absence of Ducrau, who now returned, his face looking fresher and his hair damp at the temples like a man who has just washed his face.

‘We’ll ask him.’

Maigret was drawing deep on his pipe, holding his glass of cognac in one hand and studiously avoiding looking at Decharme, who had blenched but did not dare say a word.

‘Ah, Ducrau, your son-in-law has been asking me if I think you’re a murderer and if I’m planning to arrest you.’

They must have heard him from upstairs because the sound of footsteps above their heads stopped dead. Despite his composure, Ducrau stopped breathing.

‘You mean he’s asking ... if I ...’

‘Don’t forget that he has a commission in the Army. As it happens, he was reminding me about standing practice in cases like this. When an officer fails in his duty, as he elegantly put it, his best friends leave him alone in a room with a revolver.’

Ducrau never once took his eyes off Decharme, who was now moving, aimlessly it seemed, to the far end of the room.

‘Ah! He said ...’

For one brief moment, it seemed that things might turn nasty. But Ducrau's face relaxed slowly, perhaps as the result of a heroic effort of self-control. He smiled. His grin grew broader. Then he laughed! He laughed so hard that he slapped his thighs.

'It's hilarious!' he managed to say eventually, his eyes streaming with tears of laughter. 'Oh, Decharme, my boy! What a very charming fellow you are! But come on, you two, we'll go in to dinner. Officers who ... When somebody has failed in his ... Decharme, you prize idiot! And to think we're now about to sit down to eat together!'

Maigret's shirt was sticking to his skin, but no one observing him empty his pipe into the ashtray and slip it into its case before putting it back in his pocket would have suspected a thing.



10.

The maid brought the tureen of soup just as Ducrau, with a sigh of contentment, was tucking a generous portion of his serviette between his detachable collar and his skin. There was no fire lit, and Madame Ducrau, who felt the cold, had wrapped round her shoulders a black knitted shawl which resembled a large candle-snuffer.

Berthe's empty chair was directly opposite Ducrau, who said to the servant: 'Go and tell my daughter to come down.'

He helped himself to soup and placed an enormous piece of bread next to his plate.

Because his wife kept sniffing, he frowned two or three times before finally losing patience.

'Have you caught a cold?'

'I think so,' she stammered, turning her head away so no one would see that she was about to start crying again.

Meanwhile, Decharme was keeping an ear open for sounds from upstairs as he plied his spoon most elegantly.

'Well, Mélie?'

'Madame Berthe says to say she can't come down.'

Ducrau slurped his soup noisily.

'You can go back up and tell her again that I want her to come down whether or not she's ill. Have you got that?'

Decharme left the room, and Ducrau seemed to be looking round for someone else to persecute.

‘Mélie, open the curtains.’

He was sitting opposite two windows which gave on to the courtyard, the gate and the Seine. Leaning the full weight of his torso against the table, he ate his bread as he looked out into the blackness of the night. On the floor above, there were urgent sounds, whispers, sobs. When Decharme reappeared it was to say:

‘She’s coming.’

And so she was. His wife walked in just moments later. She had not taken the trouble to cover up the shiny redness of her face with powder.

‘Mélie!’ called Ducrau.

He paid no attention to Maigret or the others. It was as if he was leading a separate life and following some prepared plan with detached unconcern.

‘Serve the next course!’

As she leaned across the table to reach the soup tureen he patted her on the rump.

If their servant at Charenton was young, this one was of indeterminate age and lacking in both spirit and charm.

‘By the by, Mélie, when was the last time we slept together?’

She gave a start, tried vainly to smile, looked apprehensively at her employer and then at his wife. As for Ducrau, he merely shrugged and gave a pitying smile.

‘Here’s another woman who thinks all that sort of thing is important. You can go. Actually, it was this morning, when we were down choosing wine in the cellar.’

He could not stop himself casting a glance at Maigret to gauge the effect he had produced, but the inspector looked as if he was far above such matters.

Madame Ducrau had not reacted. She had sunk a little further into her knitted candle-snuffer and was staring closely at the tablecloth while her daughter kept dabbing her red nose with her handkerchief.

‘Have you noticed?’ Ducrau asked Maigret, motioning with his chin towards the courtyard and the gate.

There was just one gas lamp, and it cast a small circle of light just by the postern. And inside this circle stood a motionless figure. It was barely ten metres away.

The man was leaning on the gate and could not have missed anything that happened in the brightly lit dining room.

‘It’s him!’ said Ducrau.

Maigret, whose eyesight was very good, could just make out a second figure a little further back, on the bank of the Seine. The maid, tense with fear, brought in the meat and mashed potato while the inspector, who had taken a notebook from his pocket, tore a page from it, on which he scribbled a few words.

‘Would you mind if I make use of your maid? Thanks. Mélie, I want you to go across the courtyard. On the other side of the gate, the first thing you’ll see is an old man. Ignore him. A few metres further on you’ll find somebody else, a man about thirty years old. Give him this note and wait for an answer.’

The maid hardly dared move. Ducrau went on carving the leg of mutton. Madame Ducrau, who was awkwardly placed, was twisting and turning so that she could see outside.

‘Rare, inspector?’

His hand was steady and the look in his eye unconcerned, and yet there was something in his bearing, some note of pathos that didn’t belong in this everyday scene of a group of people sitting around a dinner table.

‘Got any money put by?’ Ducrau suddenly barked at his son-in-law.

‘Me?’ was all a stunned Decharme could find to say.

‘Now look here ...’ began his daughter who was shaking with exasperation or anger.

‘I advise you to keep your mouth shut. And I request that you remain seated. I have my reasons for asking your husband if he has any savings. Well, what’s the answer?’

‘Of course I don’t have any.’

‘Too bad! This mutton is disgusting. Was it you who cooked it, Jeanne?’

‘It was Mélie.’

His eyes reverted to the window, but he was unable to see much in the dark and only just made out the white fleck of the maid’s apron as she walked back; soon after, she was handing Maigret a piece of paper. There were drops of water in her hair.

‘Is it raining?’

‘Yes. Drizzling. It’s just started.’

Lucas had replied using the same scrap of paper on which Maigret had written: 'Is he armed?' Diagonally across it was a single word: 'No'.

As if he could see through the paper, Ducrau asked:

'Armed?'

Maigret hesitated and then nodded a yes. Everyone had heard. Everyone had seen. Madame Ducrau swallowed a piece of meat whole, without chewing it.

Even Ducrau, so full of swagger, throwing out his chest, eating with simulated appetite, gave a little start.

'We were talking about your savings ...'

Maigret realized that he was launched. He had hit his stride. Nothing now could stop him and he started by pushing his plate away to make more room for his elbows.

'Too bad! Suppose that sometime soon, maybe tomorrow or some other time, I were to die. You're thinking that you'll be rich because even if I wanted to I don't have the right to disinherit my wife and my daughter.'

His chair was now tilted on its back legs, and he looked like a guest telling stories at the end of a dinner.

'Well, I can tell you now that none of you will get a penny!'

His daughter watched him coldly, trying to understand, while her husband seemed to be concentrating entirely on eating. Maigret, who now had his back to the window, was thinking that from where Gassin was, in the drizzling rain, the brightly lit dining room must seem a haven of family peace.

Meanwhile, Ducrau went on, his eyes switching from one face to another:

'You won't get a penny because, to make sure you don't, I have signed a contract which will come into force only at my death, which will transfer all my business interests to the General Canal Company. Forty million, in round figures! Only the forty million won't be payable for twenty years!'

He laughed, though he did not in the least feel like laughing, and then turned to his wife:

'You, old girl, will be well dead by then!'

'Please, Émile!'

Although she was sitting up straight and dignified, it was clear that she was at the end of her tether, that at any moment she might start swaying and fall off her chair.

Maigret watched Ducrau, looking for some sign of emotion or hesitation, but on the contrary he grew even harder, maybe because he had made up his mind that he wouldn't show his feelings.

'Still think I should go quietly by taking the honourable way out?' he asked his son-in-law, whose jaw started to tremble.

'I swear I ...'

'Don't swear! You know very well that you're a rat, a well-bred, dirty little rat, which is the worst sort. But what I'm wondering is: which of you is the more worthless, my daughter or you? Would you like a little bet? For some weeks now you've been making a great hoo-ha about this baby that's on the way. Well, if you fancy a flutter, why don't I call a doctor? I'll give you a hundred thousand francs if Berthe is really pregnant!'

Madame Ducrau's eyes opened wide, for they were suddenly seeing the truth, but her daughter continued to stare at Ducrau with hate-filled calm.

'Well lookie here!' he said getting to his feet with his pipe clenched between his teeth. 'One, two, three! An old woman, a daughter and a son-in-law! Hardly enough to fit round a small table, and yet it's all I have, or rather should have, that's mine and at my side ...'

Dispassionately, Maigret moved his chair back a little and started filling his pipe.

'Now I'd like to say something, in the presence of the inspector, because his word wouldn't count: there are no other witnesses, since a man's relatives cannot testify against him, that's the situation! ... I am a murderer! With these two hands, I ...'

His daughter jumped. His son-in-law stood up stammering:

'Oh really!'

His wife did not move. Perhaps she had stopped hearing what was being said. She wasn't crying. Her head was resting on her clasped hands.

Ducrau was pacing around heavily. He crossed from one wall to another, smoking his large pipe.

'Want to know why and how I did away with him?'

Nobody asked to be told. But clearly he needed to tell it, though without dropping his threatening manner. Suddenly he sat down opposite Maigret and held out one hand across the table.

‘I’m bigger than you, aren’t I? Anyone would say so if they saw the two of us together. In twenty years I’ve never come across anyone who could beat me at arm wrestling. Hold out your hand!’

He grabbed it with such frenzy that Maigret felt the force of the man’s feverish intensity. And did this contact not trigger a corresponding release of Ducrau’s own feelings and did his voice not become warmer?

‘Know how to play this? The winner is whoever wrestles his opponent’s arm down on the table. You mustn’t move your elbow.’

The veins on his head stood out, his cheeks turned crimson, and Madame Ducrau watched him as if all she was thinking about were his chances of getting a seizure.

‘You’re not using all your strength!’

It was true. But when Maigret turned up the power he was amazed to find his opponent’s resistance crumble, for his muscles slackened under the slightest pressure. His hand touched the table and Ducrau remained in that position for a moment, his arm limp.

‘That’s how the whole thing started ...’

He walked to the window and opened it. The damp breath of the river flooded into the room.

‘Gassin! Hey! Gassin!’

Something moved near the gas lamp, but no crunch of footsteps was heard on the courtyard gravel.

‘I wonder what he’s waiting for. Deep down, he is the only one who ever liked me.’

As he said the words, he looked directly at Maigret as if to say:

‘Because you couldn’t bring yourself to ...!’

There was only red wine on the table. He poured himself two glassfuls in quick succession.

‘Listen to me: it doesn’t matter if I spell it all out because tomorrow, if I want, I’ll deny everything. One evening, I was on Gassin’s boat—’

‘Going to see your mistress,’ broke in his daughter.

He merely gave a shrug and intoned in an indefinable cadence:

‘Stupid girl! ... I was saying, Maigret, that one evening I turned up at Gassin’s boat, feeling sickened because the squalid pair you see here had tried yet again

to fleece me. I was surprised not to see the full circle of light in the porthole. I went closer, and what did I see but some bastard lying flat on the deck watching my daughter undressing ...’

As he said *my daughter* he looked around at them defiantly, but neither word produced a reaction.

‘I bent down quietly. I grabbed him by the wrist and squeezed and turned it and forced him to twist like an eel until half his body was hanging over the side of the boat ...’

He had resumed his station by the window and was talking into the rainy night, so that it required an effort to hear what he was saying.

‘Until then, I’d always got the better of the strongest men. This time, it didn’t work. I’d got soft! The swine stopped wriggling and squirming. He took something out of his pocket and suddenly I felt a blow in the back. It took him a moment to regain his balance, and then with a nudge of the shoulder he tipped me into the water ...’

What was most staggering of all was the utter stillness of his wife. It was cold in the room. Through the open window, it was no longer just cool air which seeped in but shadows, spine-tingling chills, the thrill of danger, of menace.

‘Gassin! Are you there, old friend?’

Maigret turned and saw Gassin leaning on the gate, which had not been locked.

‘Isn’t he something?’ muttered Ducrau as he returned to the table and poured himself more wine. ‘He’s had plenty of time to shoot. He can come as close as he likes ...’

Drops of sweat showed that during the preceding minutes he had never stopped being afraid! Maybe it was because he was afraid that he had opened the window and stood in front of it.

‘Mélie! ... Mélie! ... For God’s sake ...’

Eventually she appeared. She had taken off her apron and had her hat on.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m leaving.’

‘Before you leave, go out and bring the old man by the gate to me. Have you got that? Say I must talk to him.’

Mélie did not move.

‘Go on, then!’

‘No, monsieur.’

‘Are you not going to do what I tell you?’

‘I won’t go, monsieur.’

White-faced, she gave no ground and, thin, flat-chested, unfeminine and without charm, she finally stood up to Ducrau.

‘Are you refusing?’

He bore down on her, one hand raised.

‘Are you refusing?’

‘Yes! ... Yes! ... Yes! ...’

He did not hit her. Deflated, he walked past her as if she was not there, opened the front door and was heard walking across the courtyard.

His daughter had not moved. His son-in-law craned forwards to watch. But his wife had slowly got to her feet and was making slowly for the window.

Meanwhile, Maigret, taking advantage of the moment when their attention was elsewhere, poured himself a glass of wine and moved to the window only when he heard the gate creak.

The two men were standing together. They were clearly visible, so different in build, a metre apart. What they were saying was inaudible. A querulous voice at Maigret’s elbow, as high-pitched as a child’s, said:

‘Please! Can’t you ...?’

It was Madame Ducrau, her eyes locked on to the gate, who had uttered this vague, half-choked plea.

They weren’t fighting. They were talking. They came into the courtyard. Ducrau had one hand on his companion’s shoulder and seemed to be propelling him on. Before they reached the house, Decharme had enough time to ask Maigret:

‘What have you decided?’

The inspector was tempted to take a leaf out of Ducrau’s book and answer:

‘Dammit!’

The old man screwed up his eyes because of the light. His wet shoulders gleamed, and he held his cap in one hand, perhaps out of an instinctive respect because he was in a dining room.

‘Sit down!’

He sat on the edge of a chair. He kept his cap on his knees and avoided looking around him.

‘Will you have a glass of red with me? Don’t say anything. You know what I told you. You’ll have your chance to do whatever you want later. Isn’t that so, inspector? Because I never go back on my word.’

He touched his glass against Gassin’s and emptied it in one swallow and grinned.

‘Shame you missed the start.’

He was now talking only to the boatman, with odd glances at Maigret out of the corner of his eye.

‘Is it true that in the old days I could floor any man with one punch? Come on, out with it!’

‘It’s true.’

It was staggering to hear the old man’s voice like this, so soft, so surprisingly gentle.

‘Do you remember that time in Châlons when we got into a fight with those Belgians? Well the other night it was my opponent that got me, though he wasn’t fighting fair, because he used a knife. You haven’t heard about that, but no matter. I turned up on your boat, just happened to be passing, and I found him lying flat on the deck peeping through the porthole watching your kid getting undressed.’

He liked saying it again, because it fuelled his anger.

‘Now have you got it?’

Gassin shrugged, intimating that it was something he had known for a long time.

‘Listen to me ... no, have a drink first. You too, inspector. It doesn’t matter if the others are here.’

Madame Ducrau, who had not sat down again, remained standing close to the wall, half hidden by the curtain. Decharme had one elbow on the mantelpiece while his wife was sitting by herself at the table. There were sounds of someone moving about the house, and eventually this annoyed Ducrau. He opened the door, and they all saw the maid packing her bag in the hallway.

‘I’m not having this! Go if you want! You can go or fall down dead, you can do anything you like, but for God’s sake, will you stop this racket?’

‘Monsieur, I wanted to say ...’

‘There’s no “monsieur” here! You want money? Here, I don’t know how much is there. Now, goodbye – and may you get run over by a tram!’

It made him smile. He felt the better for it. He waited until Mélie had gone, banging her case against the door as she went, and then shut and bolted it himself before going back to the others. And in all that time Gassin had not moved.

‘That’s got rid of one! What were we saying? Oh yes, we were talking about your kid. If you’d been there, wouldn’t you have reacted exactly as I did?’

The old man’s eyes were watering, and his pipe had gone out. Maigret examined him closely, and at that very moment the thought struck him:

‘If in the next two minutes I haven’t got the answer, something terrible is going to happen and it’ll be on my head!’

For everything that was happening now seemed unreal. There was something else, some other story being played out underneath ... One man was talking for talking’s sake, and the other man wasn’t listening. It was the latter Maigret was observing but he could detect nothing at all in those eyes. Surely Gassin could not be that inert at a moment like this? He wasn’t even drunk! Ducrau was so sure of this that the sweat was pouring off him.

‘I wouldn’t have strangled him just for that. But there was my son who died because of him, so ...’

He stopped in front of Berthe.

‘What are you looking at me like that for? Still thinking about the cake you’ll not be getting a piece of? Hear that, Gassin? When I die, I’ll have the last laugh because I won’t be leaving them a penny!’

Maigret had suddenly started walking slowly and apparently aimlessly, moving round the room in all directions.

‘... Because I’ll tell you something important: your wife, my wife, none of all that counts for anything! I’ll tell you something that does count: the two of us in the days when ...’

Gassin was holding his glass in his left hand. His right hand was still in his jacket pocket. He didn’t have a gun, that was certain, because Lucas was not a man who made mistakes.

On one side of the old man, two metres away, was Madame Ducrau, and on his other side was Berthe.

Ducrau had paused halfway through a sentence when he saw Maigret stop behind the boatman. What happened next was so fast that nobody understood what was going on. Maigret leaned forwards and wrapped his powerful arms around Gassin's chest and arms. There was a brief scuffle. A poor old man struggling vainly to break free! Berthe screamed with fear, and her husband took two steps forwards just as Maigret's hand reached into one of the old man's pockets and took something from it.

Then it was over! Gassin, free to move, started breathing again. Ducrau waited to see Maigret open his hand. The inspector, his forehead bathed in cold sweat, took a moment to recover and then said:

'You are in no danger now.'

He was standing behind Gassin who could not see him. When Ducrau approached, Maigret said nothing but merely opened his right hand to reveal a small stick of dynamite like the kind used in quarries. As he did so, he said:

'Carry on.'

Ducrau, hooking his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, went on, in a loud, rough voice:

'I was saying ...'

He smiled. He laughed. He had to sit down.

'It's all so stupid!'

Indeed it was stupid for a man like him to feel this way after the event, so much so that his legs buckled under him. Meanwhile, Maigret, standing with his elbows on the mantelpiece next to Decharme, waited for an unpleasant dizzy spell to pass.



11.

The susurrations of rain heard through the open window evoked the gentle sound of plants being watered. The smell of damp earth floated into the dining room on every movement of the air.

From a distance, for Lucas, for example, the spectacle of so many people frozen in the brightness of the room as if they were figures in an old master, must have been alarming.

Ducrau was the first to recover.

‘Well now,’ he sighed. ‘There you have it!’

The words meant nothing, but they were a release. They stirred things. They broke the general stagnation. He looked around him with the astonishment of a man who had been expecting that something must have changed.

But nothing had changed. They were all in their places, motionless and grim. To the point where Ducrau’s footsteps, as he walked to the door, sounded like thunder.

‘Mélie, the silly bitch, has gone,’ he growled when he came back.

He turned to his wife:

‘Jeanne, you’d better go and make the coffee.’

She left the room. The kitchen couldn’t have been far because almost at once came the sound of the grinder, and Berthe got up and started to clear the table.

‘So there you have it!’ repeated Ducrau, directing the remark mainly at Maigret.

The way he looked round the room now gave a meaning to the words.

‘The show’s over. We’re all friends again. The coffee is being ground. There’s a rattle of cups and saucers.’

He was limp now, drained and despondent. Like a man who does not know what to do next, he picked up the dynamite from the mantelpiece where Maigret had left it and looked at the maker’s name. He turned to Gassin.

‘It’s from one of my sites, isn’t it? Maybe the quarry at Venteuil?’

The old man nodded a yes. Ducrau looked thoughtfully at the dynamite and explained:

‘We always used to keep some on board, remember? We used to explode the stuff in places where there were lots of fish.’

He put it back where it had been. He did not want to sit but he didn’t want to remain on his feet either. Perhaps he wanted to talk but he had no clear idea of what to say.

‘Gassin, do you understand what I’m saying?’ he sighed eventually, approaching to within a metre of the boatman.

Gassin looked at him beadily with his small, dead eyes.

‘Or rather, you don’t understand, but it’s no odds to me. Look at them!’

He gestured towards his wife and daughter, who, like black ants, were pouring coffee. The door had stayed open, and the hiss of the gas stove was audible. It was a large house, grand even, but it seemed as if the family had cut it down to their size.

‘It’s always been the same! I’ve been dragging them around by the arm for years and years. Then just for a break I go to the office and I take it out on the morons! Then ... No thanks. No sugar.’

It was the first time he had spoken to his daughter without giving her the rough side of his tongue, and she looked up at him in surprise. Her eyes were puffy, and her cheeks mottled with red.

‘You’re a good-looking girl, really! You know, Gassin, all women get like that from time to time. That’s God’s truth! Stay calm. We’re all friends here. I’m very fond of you. Everybody should be able once and for all to ...’

Perhaps out of habit, Madame Ducrau had picked up her knitting and, seated in a corner, was plying her long steel needles, Decharme was stirring his cup with a spoon ...

‘Do you know the thing that’s bothered me most in life? The fact that I slept with your wife! First, it was a stupid thing to do. I don’t even know why I did it. And then, things were never the same with you afterwards. From my window I used to watch you on the boat, and her, and the kid ... The truth is that your wife herself never knew whose she was. Maybe she was mine, maybe she was yours ...’

Berthe gave a heavy sigh. He gave her a baleful look. It was none of her business! He was not worried about either her or his wife!

‘Do you understand, old friend? Oh, say something!’

He walked round and round Gassin, not daring to look at him directly and leaving lengthy pauses between sentences.

‘But all in all, of us two, you were the happy one!’

Despite the chill of night, he felt hot.

‘Shall I give you the dynamite back? I don’t care if I get blown up. But somebody’s got to stay with the kid, on the barge ...’

His eye fell on Decharme, who was smoking a cigarette, and all the contempt a man can feel darkened his eyes as he spat:

‘Do you find this interesting?’

And then, since his son-in-law could find nothing to say:

‘You can stay! You are no more in my way than that coffee-pot – and that’s laying aside the fact that you are incapable of malice of any sort!’

He had grabbed a chair by the back and finally dared set it down in front of Gassin, sit on it and pat him on the knee.

‘Well now! Don’t you think we’re all just about at the same point? Tell me, inspector, what do you think I’ll get for Bébert?’

They were discussing the topic in the much same way that, after dinner, as a family, they might have been discussing their forthcoming holidays, all against a rhythmic accompaniment of clicking knitting needles.

‘You might get away with two years. Maybe a jury would make it a suspended sentence.’

His wife raised her head but did not go so far as to look straight at him.

‘And when it’s over, Gassin, I’ll get myself some old tin tub, the smallest tug I can find, like *Eagle I* ...’

And, his throat suddenly tightening, he added:

‘Talk to me, for God’s sake! Haven’t you got it yet? Nothing matters any more!’

‘What do you want me to say?’

The old man did not know either. He was in a daze. There is nothing more disconcerting than a situation left hanging. He was so bewildered that he suddenly reverted to his old self-effacing ways and remained seated, like a poverty-stricken visitor, not daring to move.

Ducrau shook him by the shoulders.

‘You see! Maybe we can still do things together! Tomorrow you’ll go off on the *Golden Fleece*. Then, one fine day, just when you’re least expecting it, you’ll hear someone shouting your name from a tug. It’ll be me, in dungarees! The other men won’t understand what’s going on. People will say I’ve lost money, gone bust. Not so! The truth is that I’m tired of dragging this lot around with me ...’

He could not resist glancing defiantly at Maigret.

‘You know, I can still deny everything, and it’s more than likely that you won’t be able to produce evidence that will stand up! It’s only what I thought of doing. Oh, if you only knew what I’ve thought of doing! When I was at home, convalescing, with the police busying around, I swore to myself that I’d take advantage of it and make life hard for all concerned.’

Without intending to, he turned for a moment towards his daughter and son-in-law.

‘It was such an opportunity!’

He ran his hand over his face.

‘Gassin!’ he cried, changing tack, his eyes sparkling with malevolence.

And when the old man looked up at him, he went on:

‘Is that everything? Or do you still have it in for me? You know, if you want my wife in place of ...’

He felt like crying but he couldn’t. But equally he wanted to embrace his friend. He crossed to the window and closed it, drawing the curtains like any decent, law-abiding citizen.

‘Listen, everybody. It’s now eleven o’clock. I suggest we all sleep here and tomorrow we’ll all leave together ...’

The proposal was directed mainly at Maigret, as was what followed.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of. I have no intention of running off – the very opposite! Anyway, there’s a police inspector on the premises! Jeanne, make us all a glass of grog before we go to bed ...’

She obeyed like some skivvy, abandoning her knitting needles. Ducrau walked to the courtyard door and called into the damp night air:

‘Officer! Come inside. Your boss is asking for you.’

Lucas was wet, bewildered and worried.

‘You can start by having a nightcap with us.’

And so, at the end of the evening, they were all sitting around the table, each holding a steaming glass. When Ducrau held out his to clink with Gassin, the old man did not react and drank noisily.

‘Are there enough sheets on the beds?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Berthe.

‘Go and see to it, then.’

A little later, he confided to Maigret:

‘I’m so tired I could drop, yet in spite of everything I’m feeling better!’

The women trotted from room to room, making beds, finding night-clothes for everyone. Maigret, who had put the stick of dynamite in his pocket, turned to Ducrau:

‘Give me your revolver,’ he said, ‘and your word that there isn’t another one in the house.’

‘There isn’t.’

But the atmosphere was no longer tense. It was more like the mood in a bereaved house after the burial and the general feeling was one of lassitude.

Again, Ducrau approached Maigret, this time to tell him, with a gesture which included the entire household:

‘See! Even on a night like this, they can still manage to do something sordid!’

His cheeks were redder than usual. He was probably feverish. He went upstairs first, to show the way. Unexceptional bedrooms furnished like rooms in a hotel led off both sides of a corridor. Ducrau indicated the first room.

‘This is mine. Believe it or not, I’ve never been able to sleep without my wife.’

His wife had heard. She was looking in a cupboard for a pair of slippers for Maigret. Her husband gave her a pat, saying:

‘Never mind, old girl! Come along! I think I’ll be able to find a small corner for you on that old tin tub ...’

The breaking day found Maigret propped on his elbows looking out of his window, fully dressed, with a blanket draped over his shoulders, for it had been a wet night. The gravel of the courtyard was still damp, and even though it had stopped raining, large, bloated drops of water were still falling from the cornice and the trees.

The Seine was grey. A tug towing four barges was waiting at the lock. In the far distance, in the middle of a loop of the river, another convoy of boats could be seen advancing between two lines of dark trees.

The surface of the water grew lighter. Maigret shrugged off the blanket and straightened his clothes. Nothing had happened. He had heard nothing. Just to be on the safe side, he opened the door and found Lucas standing in the corridor outside.

‘You can come in.’

Lucas, pale with fatigue, took a drink from the water jug, stood in front of the window and stretched.

‘Nothing!’ he said. ‘No one stirred. The young couple were last to go to sleep. They were still talking in whispers at one in the morning.’

They saw the chauffeur, who did not live in, arrive on his bicycle.

‘I’d give anything for a cup of steaming-hot coffee,’ sighed Lucas.

‘Go and make some!’

It was as though his wish had been anticipated. There was a shuffling sound from the corridor. Madame Ducrau, in a dressing gown with an Indian scarf around her head, was padding quietly along the corridor.

‘Up already?’ she said in surprise. ‘I’ll go down this minute and make the breakfast.’

The tension had not affected her in any lasting way. She looked the same as she must always have looked, glum and pinched.

‘Better stay in the corridor.’

Maigret washed his face in cold water to wake himself up and soon, turning round, he saw that the river had changed colour and that the tug and the barges had passed through the lock. There was a pink glow in the sky, and birds were

singing. An engine throbbed. It was the car, which the chauffeur was driving out of the garage. But it was not yet fully day. The cold of night remained in their bones, and the sun had not brought life to the landscape.

‘Chief, here he is ...’

It was Ducrau, who emerged from his room and entered Maigret’s, braces hanging down, hair uncombed and his shirt open over his hairy chest.

‘Need anything? Want me to lend you a razor?’

He too looked out at the Seine, but through different eyes. He said:

‘Ah! They’ve made a start with the sand.’

Downstairs, there was again the sound of the coffee-grinder.

‘Tell me, for going to prison, what am I allowed to take with me?’

He was not joking. He was simply asking.

‘If you like, we could leave immediately after breakfast. We could drop Gassin off on his boat, and that might give me a chance to get a glimpse of Aline ...’

Not fully dressed, he looked enormous, like a bear, especially with his trousers concertinaed around his legs.

‘There’s one other thing I must ask you. You know what I said last night about my money? I can technically do it, and it would drive my daughter and her husband wild. But, given the circumstances ...’

It was all over! He was fully awake with, as happens after a serious bout of drinking, a bitter taste in his mouth and a clear head.

‘Either way, you’ll make your competitors’ day for them ...’ said Maigret.

That sufficed. The solid look of the boss, the chief, returned to Ducrau’s eyes.

‘Can you advise me about a good lawyer?’

The tug was blowing its hooter to signal it was approaching the next lock and, by the same token, specified the number of barges it was towing. They did not hear Madame Ducrau coming in her felt slippers.

‘The coffee’s ready,’ she said meekly.

‘You don’t mind if I come down just as I am? It’s an old habit. Let’s go and rouse Gassin.’

His was the room next door. Ducrau knocked on the door.

‘Gassin! ... Hello! ... Gassin?’

He was already filled with foreboding. His hand reached for the knob of the door. He turned it, took one step inside and turned to Maigret

There was no one in the room. The bed had not been slept in, and the nightshirt provided by Madame Ducrau still lay, arms widespread, on the counterpane.

‘Gassin!’

The window was not open and Maigret couldn’t help giving Lucas a suspicious look. But Ducrau had seen something, a dangling length of curtain cord. Cool and collected, he stepped forwards and drew back the fabric.

A body, dark and elongated, was hanging against the wall. The cord was not very strong for, at the first touch, it snapped, and the old man collapsed on to the floor, a heavy mass, like a statue, so that it seemed that he might shatter.

The smell of stale pipe-smoke still lingered in the dining room, where the dirty glasses and ashtrays had not been cleared away. The tablecloth was stained from the night before. The car was waiting just outside the window, which had just been opened.

Nothing had been said to Madame Ducrau. The young couple, who could be heard moving about upstairs, had yet to come down.

Ducrau was eating with his elbows on the table. It was amazing how much he ate for breakfast, grimly, as if stalked by the most voracious hunger. He didn’t speak. His jaws made a noise. He made even more as he slurped his café au lait.

‘Fetch down my jacket and my collar and tie.’

‘Aren’t you going to get dressed in your room?’

‘Just do as you’re told.’

He was looking straight in front of him. He ate quickly. When he finally stood to put on the jacket which his wife was holding for him, he was breathing hard.

‘I’ve packed a case for you.’

‘Later.’

‘Aren’t you going to wait until Berthe ...’

She pointed to the ceiling, but he did not even bother to respond.

‘What about Gassin?’

‘Inspector Lucas is taking care of that,’ broke in Maigret.

Lucas had already phoned both the local police and the public prosecutor's office.

Then Ducrau and Maigret left with indecent haste. Ducrau kissed his wife on the forehead, probably without being aware of what he was doing.

'Did you mean it, Émile. Are we to go back to the old tin tub?'

'Yes, yes, sure we are!'

He was in a hurry. It was as if something was drawing him on. He settled himself heavily into the back of his car, and it was Maigret who said to the driver:

'Charenton!'

They did not turn and look back. What was the point? They'd gone several kilometres through the forest of Fontainebleau when Ducrau gripped Maigret's arm and said:

'It's perfectly true: I don't even know why I slept with his wife!'

And, without pausing, he said to the chauffeur:

'Can't you go any faster?'

His beard had grown, he had not washed, and his face looked dirty. He felt vainly for his pipe, which he had forgotten, until the chauffeur finally handed him cigarettes in a blue packet.

'You may or may not believe this, but I've rarely been as happy as I was last night. It's hard to explain. Do you know what my old lady did when we were in bed? She snuggled up to me and cried and said I was a good man!'

His voice sounded congested, as if a whole host of words were clogging his throat.

'Faster, damn you!' he urged, leaning over the chauffeur's shoulder.

They sped through Corbeil, Juvisy, Villejuif, and weaved through all the cars belonging to the owners of villas who returned to Paris every Monday morning. There was as much sun as the previous evening. The rain had merely served to green up the fields and the trees. They stopped at a petrol station, where eight red pumps were lined up in the sunshine. The chauffeur turned to his employer:

'Do you have a hundred francs?'

Ducrau just handed him his wallet.

At last they drove into Paris, down Avenue d'Orléans, along the Seine. The windows of the company's offices were being cleaned when they got to Quai des

Célestins. Ducrau leaned against the car door. When they reached a small bar, he stopped the car.

‘Is it all right if I buy a pipe and some tobacco?’

Inside, all he could get was a cherrywood pipe costing two francs. He filled it slowly as the quays slipped by. They passed the stockpiled barrels at Bercy.

‘Slow down!’

They sensed rather than saw the lock, above which reared an empty barge which had been raised to the top in the chamber.

The stone-crusher was already working. Washing had been hung out to dry on the boats moored at the quayside.

In the bar, men in sailors’ caps recognized the boss and crowded round the window.

‘I think it would be best ...’ began Ducrau.

But he overcame a moment of weakness and walked down the stone steps. He did not spare a glance for his house, nor for the open window, through which the maid was visible. He stepped on to the *Golden Fleece*’s flimsy gangplank.

People on the other barges waved to him.

He bent over the hatch at the same moment as Maigret and, also at the same moment as him, he saw Aline, with one breast bared, holding a baby in her arms, sitting at a table spread with a cloth embroidered with roses. She cradled the child. She was looking straight in front of her. And whenever her breast escaped from the eager little mouth, she restored it with a practised gesture.

It was hot. The stove had been lit for some time. From a clothes hook hung a heavy jacket belonging to old Gassin, and his shoes, ready-polished, had been placed under it.

With a slow but firm movement of his arm, Maigret prevented Ducrau from going further, drew him to the tiller and held out a letter which had been written on paper supplied by a bar.

I’m writing to let you know that I am well and I hope that this finds you likewise ...

Ducrau did not understand. Then slowly it came back to him: the inn, the village in the Haute-Marne and Gassin’s sister, whom he had known, once upon a time.

‘She’ll be well looked after there,’ said Maigret.

The sun was growing warmer. A passing boatman shouted:

‘The *Albatross* has broken down at Meaux!’

He meant it for Ducrau and was very surprised not to get a reply.

‘Shall we go?’

All around people were staring at them. One of them even came up to them on the quayside and touched his cap:

‘Got a minute, boss? It’s about the stone that’s to be unloaded ...’

‘Later.’

‘Thing is ...’

‘Dammit, Hubert, leave me alone!’

The brightly coloured livery of a tram unwound over the grey cobbles. The stone-crusher seemed to be pulverizing the whole district, and a fine white dust settled over everything.

The car had turned round. Ducrau was looking back through the small rear window.

‘It’s wonderful!’ he sighed.

‘What is?’

‘Oh nothing.’

Was it that Maigret really did not understand? Now it was he who wanted the chauffeur to go faster. It felt to him that every minute which ticked by was a danger. Ducrau was sweating profusely. At one point, just as they were overtaking a tram, his hand gripped the handle of the door.

But no, he behaved himself!

Then they were driving over the Pont-Neuf. The driver turned and asked:

‘Want to stop at the tobacconist’s?’

For the Henri IV bar-cum-tobacconist’s was still there, red and blue, opposite the equestrian statue.

‘Pull up here,’ said Maigret. ‘Then drive back to Samois and wait ...’

Walking was better. They had only a hundred metres to go, still along the bank of the Seine. As they walked, Ducrau was on the parapet side.

‘So you can leave for your new place as of now?’ he said abruptly. ‘You’ll be gaining two days.’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Pretty country down that way, is it?’

‘It’s quiet.’

Just twenty metres more, one road to cross and they'd be at the sombre buildings of the Palais de Justice, outside the main entrance of the police station, with the gate on the right-hand side.

For the second time, Ducrau's hand gripped the inspector's arm and, as they crossed the road, he gasped:

'I can't do it!'

He was talking about the Seine, the tram, the cord, anything that could prevent ...

Reaching the kerb, he turned round. The officer on sentry duty had saluted Maigret. The gate was already opening.

'I can't!' Ducrau said again as he stepped into the echoing entrance hall while a nib was already being dipped into a bottle of the purple ink used to write down his name and surname in the station register.

A tug travelling downstream sounded its hooter twice, the signal that it was taking the second arch, while a Belgian barge going upstream moved across the current and headed for the third.



**READ ON FOR AN EXTRACT FROM THE
NEXT INSPECTOR MAIGRET NOVEL**



**INSPECTOR
MAIGRET**

1.

Maigret struggled to open his eyes, frowning, as if distrustful of the voice that had just shouted at him, dragging him out of a deep sleep:

‘Uncle!’

His eyes still closed, he sighed, groped at the sheet and realized that this was no dream, that something was the matter, because his hand had not encountered Madame Maigret’s warm body where it should have been.

Finally he opened his eyes. It was a clear night. Madame Maigret, standing by the leaded window, was pulling back the curtain while downstairs someone was banging on the door and the noise reverberated throughout the house.

‘Uncle! It’s me!’

Madame Maigret was still looking out. Her hair wound in curling pins gave her a strange halo.

‘It’s Philippe,’ she said, knowing full well that Maigret was awake and that he was turned towards her, waiting. ‘Are you going to get up?’

Maigret went downstairs first, barefoot in his felt slippers. He had hastily pulled on a pair of trousers and shrugged on his jacket as he descended the staircase. At the eighth stair, he had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the beam. He usually did so automatically, but this time he forgot and banged his forehead. He groaned and swore as he reached the freezing hall. He went into the kitchen, which was a little warmer.

There were iron bars across the door. On the other side, Philippe was saying to someone:

‘I won’t be long. We’ll be in Paris before daylight.’

Madame Maigret could be heard padding around upstairs. Maigret pulled open the door, surly from the knock he had just given himself.

‘It’s you!’ he muttered, seeing his nephew standing in the road.

A huge moon floated above the leafless poplars, making the sky so light that the tiniest branches were silhouetted against it while, beyond the bend, the Loire was a glittering swarm of silvery spangles.

‘East wind!’ thought Maigret mechanically, as would any local on seeing the surface of the river whipped up.

It is one of those country habits, as is standing in the doorway without saying anything, looking at the intruder and waiting for him to speak.

‘I hope I haven’t woken Aunt up, at least?’

Philippe’s face was frozen stiff. Behind him the shape of a G7 taxi stood out incongruously against the white-frosted landscape.

‘Are you leaving the driver outside?’

‘I need to talk to you right away.’

‘Come inside quickly, both of you,’ called Madame Maigret from the kitchen where she was lighting an oil lamp.

She added to her nephew:

‘We haven’t got electricity yet. The house has been wired, but we’re waiting to be connected to the power supply.’

A lightbulb was dangling from a flex. People notice little details like that for no reason. And when they are already on edge, it is the sort of thing that can irritate them. During the minutes that followed, Philippe’s eyes kept returning to that bulb, which served no purpose other than to emphasize everything that was antiquated about this rustic house, or rather everything that is precarious about modern comforts.

‘Have you come from Paris?’

Maigret was leaning against the chimney breast, not properly awake yet. The presence of the taxi on the road made the question as redundant as the lightbulb, but sometimes people speak for the sake of saying something.

‘I’m going to tell you everything, Uncle. I’m in big trouble. If you don’t help me, if you don’t come to Paris with me, I don’t know what will become of me. I’m going out of my mind. I’m in such a state I even forgot to give my aunt a kiss.’

Madame Maigret stood there, having slipped a dressing gown over her nightdress. Philippe’s lips brushed her cheek three times, performing the ritual like a child. Then he sat down at the table, clutching his head in his hands.

Maigret filled his pipe as he watched him, while his wife stacked twigs in the fireplace. There was something strange in the air, something threatening. Since Maigret had retired, he had lost the habit of getting up in the middle of the night and he couldn't help being reminded of nights spent beside a sick person or a dead body.

'I don't know how I could have been so stupid!' Philippe suddenly sobbed.

He poured out his tale of woe in a sudden rush, punctuated by hiccups. He looked about him like a person seeking to pin his agitation on something, while, in contrast to this outburst of emotion, Maigret turned up the wick of the oil lamp and the first flames leapt up from the fireplace.

'First of all, you're going to drink something.'

The uncle took a bottle of brandy and two glasses from a cupboard that contained some leftover food and smelled of cold meat. Madame Maigret put on her clogs to go and fetch some logs from the woodshed.

'To your good health! Now try to calm down.'

The smell of burning twigs mingled with that of the brandy. Philippe, dazed, watched his aunt loom silently out of the darkness, her arms filled with logs.

He was short-sighted and, seen from a certain angle, his eyes looked enormous behind his spectacle lenses, giving him the appearance of a frightened child.

'It happened last night. I was supposed to be on a stakeout in Rue Fontaine—'

'Just a moment,' interrupted Maigret, sitting astride a straw-bottomed chair and lighting his pipe. 'Who are you working with?'

'With Chief Inspector Amadiou.'

'Go on.'

Drawing gently on his pipe, Maigret narrowed his eyes and stared at the lime-plastered wall and the shelf with copper saucepans, caressing the images that were so familiar to him. At Quai des Orfèvres, Amadiou's office was the last one on the left at the end of the corridor. Amadiou himself was a skinny, sad man who had been promoted to divisional chief when Maigret had retired.

'Does he still have a drooping moustache?'

'Yes. Yesterday we had a summons for Pepito Palestrino, the owner of the Floria, in Rue Fontaine.'

'What number?'

‘Fifty-three, next to the optician.’

‘In my day, that was the Toréador. Cocaine dealing?’

‘Cocaine initially. Then something else too. The chief had heard rumours that Pepito was mixed up in the Barnabé job, the guy who was shot in Place Blanche a fortnight ago. You must have read about it in the papers.’

‘Make us some coffee!’ said Maigret to his wife.

And, with the relieved sigh of a dog who finally settles down after chasing its tail, he leaned his elbows on the back of his chair and rested his chin on his folded hands. From time to time, Philippe removed his glasses to wipe the lenses and, for a few moments, he appeared to be blind. He was a tall, plump, auburn-haired boy with baby-pink skin.

‘You know that we can no longer do as we please. In your day, no one would have batted an eyelid at arresting Pepito in the middle of the night. But now, we have to keep to the letter of the law. That’s why the chief decided to carry out the arrest at eight o’clock in the morning. In the meantime, it was my job to keep an eye on the fellow ...’

He was getting bogged down in the dense quiet of the room, then, with a start, he remembered his predicament and cast around helplessly.

For Maigret, the few words spoken by his nephew exuded the whiff of Paris. He could picture the Floria’s neon sign, the doorman on the alert for cars arriving, and his nephew turning up in the neighbourhood that night.

‘Take off your overcoat, Philippe,’ interrupted Madame Maigret. ‘You’ll catch cold when you go outside.’

He was wearing a dinner-jacket. It looked quite incongruous in the low-ceilinged kitchen with its heavy beams and red-tiled floor.

‘Have another drink—’

But in a fresh outburst of anger Philippe jumped up, wringing his hands violently enough to crush his bones.

‘If only you knew, Uncle—’

He was on the verge of tears, his eyes stayed dry. His gaze fell on the electric lightbulb again. He stamped his foot.

‘I bet I’ll be arrested later!’

Madame Maigret, who was pouring boiling water over the coffee, turned around, saucepan in hand.

‘What on earth are you talking about?’

And Maigret, still puffing on his pipe, opened his night-shirt collar with its delicate red embroidery.

‘So you were on a stakeout opposite the Floria—’

‘Not opposite. I went inside,’ said Philippe, still on his feet. ‘At the back of the club there’s a little office where Pepito has set up a camp bed. That’s where he usually sleeps after closing up the joint.’

A cart rumbled past on the road. The clock had stopped. Maigret glanced at his watch hanging from a nail above the fireplace. The hands showed half past four. In the cowsheds, milking had begun and carts were trundling to Orléans market. The taxi was still waiting outside the house.

‘I wanted to be clever,’ confessed Philippe. ‘Last week the chief yelled at me and told me—’

He turned red and trailed off, trying to fix his gaze on something.

‘He told you—?’

‘I can’t remember—’

‘Well I can! If it’s Amadieu, he probably came out with something along the lines of: “You’re a maverick, young man, a maverick like your uncle!”’

Philippe said neither yes nor no.

‘Anyway, I wanted to be clever,’ he hastily went on. ‘When the customers left, at around 1.30, I hid in the toilet. I thought that if Pepito had got wind of anything, he might try and get rid of the stuff. And do you know what happened?’

Maigret, more solemn now, slowly shook his head.

‘Pepito was alone. Of that I’m certain! Suddenly, there was a gunshot. It took a few moments for it to dawn on me, then it took me a few more moments to run into the bar. It looked bigger, at night. It was lit by a single lightbulb. Pepito was lying between two rows of tables and as he fell he’d knocked over some chairs. He was dead.’

Maigret rose and poured himself another glassful of brandy, while his wife signalled to him not to drink too much.

‘Is that all?’

Philippe was pacing up and down. And this young man, who generally had difficulty expressing himself, began to wax eloquent in a dry, bitter tone.

‘No, that’s not all! That’s when I did something really stupid! I was scared. I couldn’t think straight. The empty bar was sinister, it felt as if it was shrouded in greyness. There were streamers strewn on the floor and over the tables. Pepito was lying in a strange position, on his side, his hand close to his wound, and he seemed to be looking at me. What can I say? I took out my revolver and I started talking. I yelled out some nonsense and my voice scared me even more. There were shadowy corners everywhere, drapes, and I had the impression they were moving. I pulled myself together and went over to have a look. I flung open a door and yanked down a velvet curtain. I found the switchbox and I wanted to turn on the lights. I pushed the switches at random. And that was even more frightening. A red projector lit the place up. Fans started humming in every corner. “Who’s there?” I shouted again.’

He bit his lip. His aunt looked at him, as distressed as he was. He was her sister’s son and had been born in Alsace. Maigret had wangled him a job at police headquarters.

‘I’d feel happier knowing he was in the civil service,’ his mother had said.

And now, he panted:

‘Please don’t be angry with me, Uncle. I don’t know myself how it happened. I can barely remember. In any case, I fired a shot, because I thought I saw something move. I rushed forwards and then stopped. I thought I heard footsteps, whisperings. But there was nothing but emptiness. I would never have believed the place was so big and full of obstacles. In the end, I found myself in the office. There was a gun on the table. I grabbed it without thinking. The barrel was still warm. I took out the chamber and saw that there was one bullet missing.’

‘Idiot!’ groaned Maigret between clenched teeth.

The coffee was steaming and Madame Maigret, sugar bowl in hand, stood there not knowing what she was doing.

‘I had completely lost my mind. I still thought I could hear a noise over by the door. I ran. It was only later that I realized I had a gun in each hand.’

‘Where did you put the gun?’

Maigret’s tone was harsh. Philippe stared at the floor.

‘All sorts of things were going through my mind. If it was a murder, people would think that since I’d been alone with Pepito—’

‘Dear God!’ groaned Madame Maigret.

‘It only lasted for a few seconds. I put the gun near Pepito’s hand, to make it look like a suicide, then—’

Maigret rose to his feet and took up his favourite position in front of the fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back. He was unshaven. He had put on a little weight since the days when he used to stand like that in front of his stove at Quai des Orfèvres.

‘When you left, you ran into someone, am I right?’

He knew it.

‘Just as I was closing the door behind me, I bumped into a man who was walking past. I apologized. Our faces were almost touching. I don’t even know whether after that I closed the door properly. I walked to Place Clichy. I took a taxi and gave the driver your address.’

Madame Maigret put the sugar bowl down on the beech table and slowly asked her husband:

‘Which suit are you wearing?’

For half an hour, it was a mad rush.

Maigret could be heard shaving and getting dressed in the bedroom. Madame Maigret cooked some eggs and questioned Philippe.

‘Have you heard from your mother?’

‘She’s well. She was planning to come to Paris for Easter.’

The driver was invited in, but he refused to remove his heavy brown overcoat. Droplets of water trembled in his moustache. He sat down in a corner and stayed put.

‘My braces?’ shouted Maigret from upstairs.

‘In the top drawer.’

Maigret came down wearing his coat with a velvet collar and his bowler hat. He pushed away the eggs waiting for him on the table and, defying his wife, drank a fourth glass of brandy.

It was 5.30 when the door opened and the three men stepped outside and got into the taxi. It took a while for the engine to start. Madame Maigret stood shivering in the doorway while the oil lamp made the reddish reflections dance on the little window panes.

The sky was so light, it felt like daybreak. But this was February and it was the night itself that was silver-coloured. Each blade of grass was rimed with frost. The apple trees in the neighbouring orchard were iced so white that they looked as fragile as spun glass.

‘See you in two or three days!’ yelled Maigret.

Philippe, embarrassed, shouted:

‘Goodbye, Aunt!’

The driver slammed the car door again and crunched the gears for a moment.

‘Please forgive me, Uncle —’

‘What for?’

What for? Philippe didn’t dare say. He was asking forgiveness because there was something dramatic about this departure. He recalled his uncle’s silhouette earlier, by the fireplace, with his nightshirt, his old clothes, his slippers.

And now, he barely dared look at him. It was indeed Maigret who was beside him, smoking his pipe, his velvet collar upturned, his hat perched on his head. But it wasn’t an enthusiastic Maigret. It wasn’t even a Maigret who was sure of himself. Twice he turned round and watched his little house receding.

‘Did you say that Amadieu will arrive at Rue Fontaine at eight?’ he asked.

‘Yes, at eight o’clock.’

They had time. The taxi was going quite fast. They drove through Orléans, where the first trams were setting out. Less than an hour later, they reached the market in Arpajon.

‘What do you think, Uncle?’

It was draughty in the back of the car. The sky was clear. There was a golden glow in the east.

‘How could Pepito have been killed?’ sighed Philippe, who received no reply.

They stopped after Arpajon to warm up in a café and almost at once it was daylight, with a pale sun slowly rising where the fields met the horizon.

‘There was no one but him and me in—’

‘Be quiet!’ said Maigret wearily.

His nephew huddled in his corner with the look of a child caught misbehaving, not daring to take his eyes off the door.

They entered Paris as the early-morning bustle was beginning. Past the Lion de Belfort, Boulevard Raspail, the Pont-Neuf ...

The city looked as if it had been washed in clean water, so bright were the colours. A train of barges was gliding slowly up the Seine and the tugboat whistled, puffing out clouds of immaculate steam to announce its flotilla.

‘How many passers-by were there in Rue Fontaine when you came out?’

‘I only saw the man I ran into.’

Maigret sighed and emptied his pipe, tapping it against his heel.

The driver pulled down the glass partition and inquired: ‘Where to?’

They stopped for a moment at a hotel on the embankment to drop off Maigret’s suitcase, then they got back into the taxi and made their way to Rue Fontaine.

‘It’s not so much what happened at the Floria that worries me. It’s the man who bumped into you.’

‘What are you thinking?’

‘I’m not thinking anything!’

He came out with this favourite expression from the past as he turned round to glimpse the outline, once so familiar, of the Palais de Justice.

‘At one point I thought of going to the big chief and telling him the whole story,’ muttered Philippe.

Maigret did not answer and, until they reached Rue Fontaine, he kept his gaze fixed on the view of the Seine as it flowed through a fine blue and gold mist.

They pulled up a hundred metres from number 53. Philippe turned up the collar of his overcoat to conceal his dinner-jacket, but at the sight of his patent-leather shoes, people turned round to stare all the same.

It was only 6.50. A window-cleaner was washing the windows of the corner café, the Tabac Fontaine, which stayed open all night. People on their way to work stopped off for a quick *café crème* with a croissant. There was only a waiter serving since the owner did not get to bed before five or six in the morning and rose at midday. He was a swarthy young southern-looking fellow with black hair. There were cigar ends and cigarette butts lying on a table next to a slate used for keeping score for card games.

Maigret bought a packet of shag and ordered a sandwich, while Philippe grew impatient.

‘What happened last night?’ asked Maigret, his mouth full of bread and ham.

And, gathering up the change, the waiter answered bluntly:

‘People are saying the owner of the Floria was killed.’

‘Palestrino?’

‘I don’t know. I’m on the day shift. And during the day, we don’t have anything to do with the nightclubs.’

They left. Philippe did not dare say anything.

‘You see?’ grumbled Maigret.

Standing on the kerb, he added:

‘That’s the work of the man you bumped into, you realize. Theoretically, no one should know anything before eight o’clock.’

They walked towards the Floria, but they stopped fifty metres short. They spotted the peaked cap of a Paris police sergeant standing in front of the door. On the opposite pavement, a knot of people had gathered.

‘What shall I do?’

‘Your chief is bound to be at the scene. Go up to him and tell him—’

‘What about you, Uncle?’

Maigret shrugged and went on:

‘—Tell him the truth.’

‘Supposing he asks where I went next?’

‘Tell him you came to fetch me.’

There was resignation in his voice. They had got off on the wrong foot, and that was all! It was a stupid business and Maigret felt like gnashing his teeth.

‘I’m sorry, Uncle!’

‘No emotional scenes in the street! If they let you go free, meet me in the Chope du Pont-Neuf. If I’m not there, I’ll leave you a note.’

They did not even shake hands. Philippe headed straight for the Floria. The sergeant did not know him and tried to bar him from entering. Philippe had to show his badge, then he vanished inside.

Maigret remained at a distance, his hands in his pockets, like the other onlookers. He waited. He waited for almost half an hour, without the least idea of what was going on inside the club.

Detective Chief Inspector Amadieu came out first, followed by a short, nondescript man who looked like a waiter.

And Maigret needed no explanations. He knew that this was the man who had bumped into Philippe. He could guess Amadieu’s question.

‘Was it right here that you bumped into him?’

The man nodded. Inspector Amadiou beckoned Philippe, who was still inside. He came out, looking as nervous as a young musician, as if the entire street were aware of the suspicions that were about to engulf him.

‘And was this the gentleman who was coming out at that moment?’ Amadiou must have been saying, tugging his brown moustache.

The man nodded again.

There were two other police officers. The divisional chief glanced at his watch and, after a brief discussion, the man sauntered off and went into the Tabac Fontaine while the policemen went back inside the Floria.

Fifteen minutes later, two cars arrived. It was the public prosecutor.

‘I’ve got to go back to repeat my statement,’ the man from the Floria told the waiter at the Tabac Fontaine. ‘Another white wine and Vichy, quick!’

And, discomfited by Maigret’s insistent stare as he stood nearby drinking a beer, he lowered his voice and asked:

‘Who’s that?’

Looking for more?

Visit Penguin.com for more about this author and a complete list of their books.

[Discover your next great read!](#)

